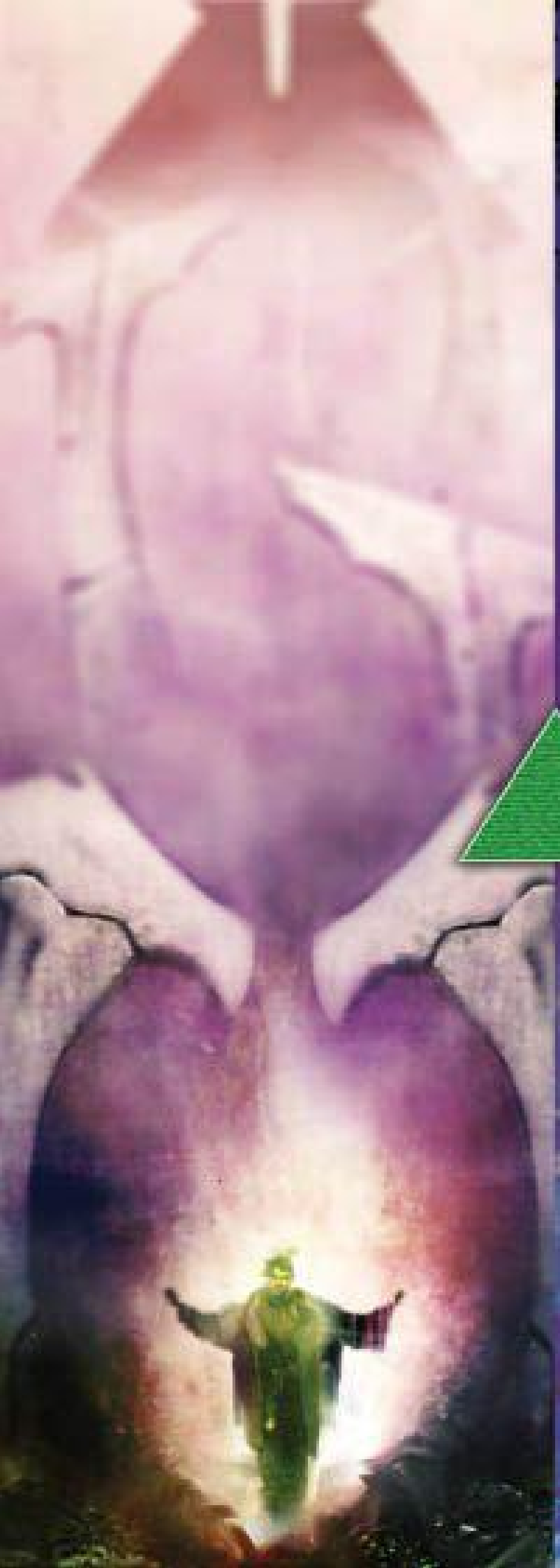
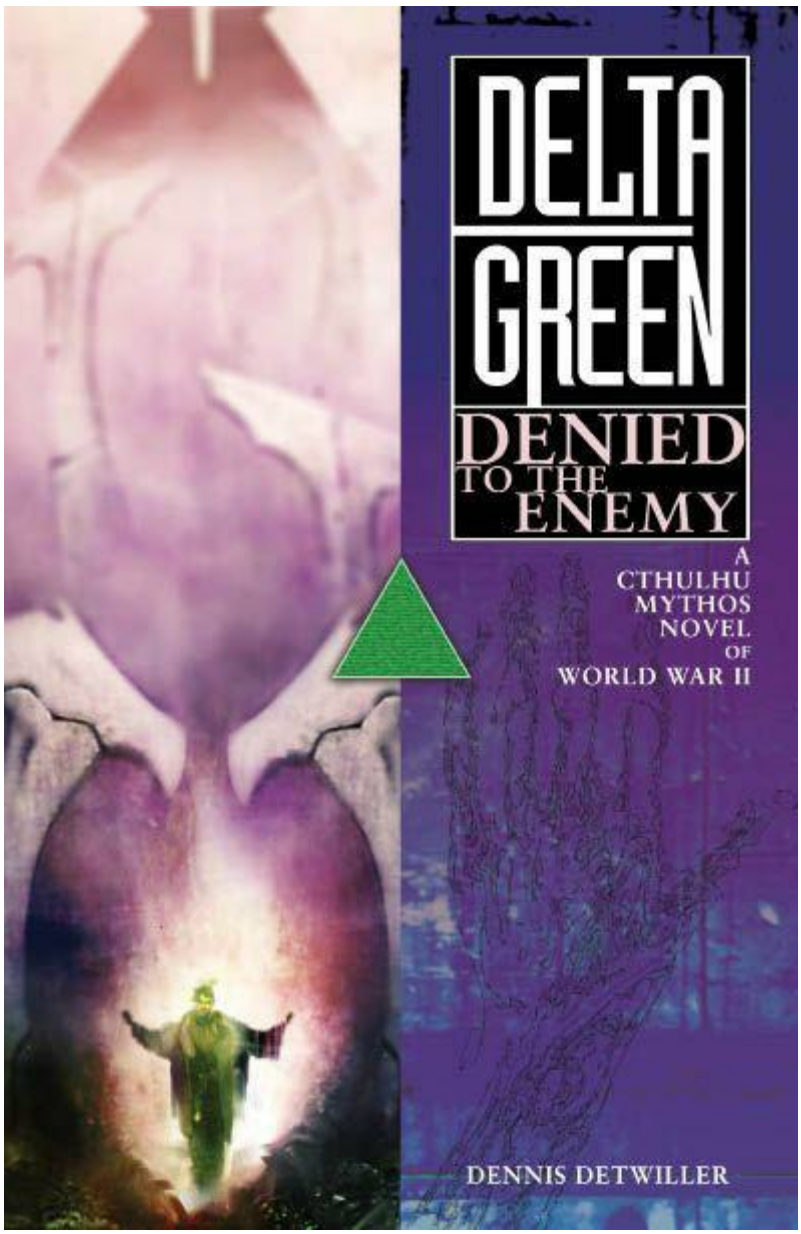


DELTA GREEN

DENIED TO THE ENEMY

A CTHULHU MYTHOS NOVEL OF WORLD WAR II

DENNIS DETWILLER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Delta Green:

Denied to the Enemy

The Cthulhu Mythos during the Second World War

By Dennis Detwiller

Arc Dream Publishing

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PROLOGUE:
To Hinder a Gentleman from Hell

December 24, 1961: Blackpool, U.K.

Lieutenant General David Leslie Cornwall, O.B.E., gray and distinguished and frail, crept away from the festivities which consumed the lower rooms of Clark House and slowly ascended into the darkened floors which lay above, sinking into the shadows like a fish into water. It was his house and it was filled with phantoms, people he did not really know or care to know. Empty, shallow people who swore friendship to him and then turned their backs on him when the parties ended. And the parties always ended. Some were family, blood relations, others just former colleagues or their successors. None of them meant one spot to David Cornwall. But he was always very polite. He was always very British.

Christmas songs rang out from below. It was like this every year, good cheer and festivities which brought back a hundred memories at once; recollections of times when his life had meaning and purpose, of people and places his decisions had changed forever. They were all gone now. All gone. The old man considered his watch in the dark. The ghostly green hands of the watch, illuminated by radium, showed it was ten minutes to midnight. Soon it would be Christmas day, a sight he would never live to see.

The thought did not bring any great sorrow.

The stairs creaked as he moved slowly forward up the rich burgundy rugs, his stocking feet whispering on the plush surface, navigating by memory as much as by instinct in the darkness. Hallways shot off in three directions at the top of the stairs, and the old man went straight ahead, pausing a moment to comically salute a suit of armor which hung suspended in an alcove, lit vaguely by light from under the door. He supposed it was the alcohol.

The old man slid the door open slowly, hoping to avoid the horrible whine he knew would occur from its rusty hinges. It happened anyway, but there was no pause from below. No hesitation in the dull roar of his family as the festivities continued. No one had even noticed his absence, he was sure.

The study was silent, warm and scholarly, lit only by a green-visored desk lamp. It had slipped his mind to quash the light when he had retired for the evening last night. He considered the empty room, filled with books and other written documentation of a world which had somehow slipped from his grasp. A world of detente and nouveau riche and farmers' sons in charge of weapons which could level cities. England was a target now, a stop over on the way for Russian missiles

heading across the Atlantic. It was a glorified American airbase which would be sacrificed, if—

If. He used to know so much of "if." He used to be able to dictate what ifs would come to pass and which would not. He was once a powerful man. But no longer. Except for one thing.

Except for the book.

The one book in the room which still spoke of ifs. Which could still control their outcome... But it was best not to think of such things. Soon enough he would know. The truth would be revealed in the next few minutes. Either way, it meant the end for him. Either way it would come, he welcomed it.

He thought of Dr. Faust and the devil's bargain:

How uselessly I've laboured to collect
The treasures of the human intellect,
And now I sit and wonder what I've done.
I feel no new strength surging in my soul.
I'm not a hairsbreadth taller, I'm not one
Step nearer the infinite goal.

But there were other sources of information than the human intellect.

He crept over to the desk and sat down in his old man's manner, letting out a sigh of pain and discomfort as he settled into the warm recesses of the chair. Sliding the bottom right drawer open he removed a large teak box and placed it carefully on the desk, lining it up so it was perfectly flush with the edge. Intricate Chinese designs were incised in the cover, wrapping and intertwining to form complex geometric forms. The wood was shiny and thick with shellac, the light tan wood gone a deep and rich brown-black with age.

The box was a gift from Lt. Commander Ramsey, a man long since gone. He supposed he was feeling now what Ramsey felt then, when he gave him the box as a gift in Hong Kong in 1930: the sensation of extinction, an early whiff of the grave. The last fading feelings of surety and faith in oneself.

With the gift the mantle had been passed, as it had been a million times before. Did Ramsey feel the same sense of emptiness? Did Ramsey understand what he was doing while he was doing it, or was it base instinct? More importantly, who held the mantle now?

Cornwall found with regret he could not say.

The box had been constructed to house a large pistol and several cartridges. Inside was his Webley revolver, a huge and cumbersome-looking weapon. It had hung from his belt on a chain during the Great War, and had been with him ever since.

The old man closed his eyes. In his mind he could see his men crawling over the moonscape of No Man's Land, cratered, broken, and rich with the rotting bodies of medics, snipers, and infantrymen left for the rats.

And worse things.

Cornwall opened his eyes and blinked rapidly, trying to push his memories away, but they clung to his vision even after his eyes were wide. Nightmare lupine shapes leaping through trenches with razor claws and breath like a million opened tombs. McAllistair screaming. Gunfire in close quarters as deafening as a thunder blast, over and over and over again. Taloned hands playing through human innards like a child plays in the sand. Glowing green feral eyes in the tunnels floating in the black, silent, like fireflies. Screaming. McAllistair screaming.

Then the roar of the shells falling like spring rain.

Even now, over forty years later, Cornwall found his hands shaking at the memory. With a grunt, he stood and shuffled over to the liquor closet. He made this trip so frequently he was surprised his footprints weren't trodden into the ancient rug by now. Fumbling with a glass and Glenlivet, Cornwall poured a deep tumbler of the brown liquid and swallowed most of it in one long gulp.

Liquid courage. As the warmth filled his body Cornwall limped back to the chair and sat, hardly feeling the shooting pains in his knees through the alcohol haze as he settled in.

He removed the gun from the box, cradling it in his gnarled fingers, and for a moment, the pain of the old joints in his hand, a pain no medicine seemed capable of curing, slipped away as he began to disassemble it. He paused only once during his laborious and careful cleaning to check the clock on the wall.

Five minutes to midnight.

He reassembled the weapon rapidly, with the certainty of training. It was only when he picked up the bullet that his hands began to shake. But in one fluid motion, his trembling hands slipped a thick round in the open face of the Webley, and snapped the break-open revolver closed with a click. It was now a weapon. Cornwall's jaundiced blue eyes found the clock and fastened on it.

Like any good knight of the realm, he would not be late for his final appointment.

PART ONE:
The World’s End

CHAPTER 1:
Here deeds have understood the words they were darkened by

October 10, 1942: Antwerp, Belgium

Belgium lay beneath the crushing weight of the Third Reich like a corpse. When SS Hauptscharführer Karl Bruning stepped from the plane at Brussels, he knew he had come to the land of the dead. The Belgian nationals who moved his luggage from the transport plane to the car stumbled about with the idiotic gait of those too foolish to realize their end had already long since passed. They had missed their cues in the play of life and had failed to exit at the proper dramatic moment. Now they wandered about the stage, searching for direction.

In reality, Belgium had ceased to exist in all but name almost two years ago to the day of Bruning's hasty arrival. What remained after the Nazis had scoured it clean of undesirables continued to plod along, desperately imitating some dimly-remembered semblance of life. Papers were printed, beer was consumed, wood was cut and burnt, just as it was before the coming of Blitzkrieg, but now all under the watchful eye of the Wermacht and Gestapo. What remained struggled to be the same, but the people were quieter, the streets more blank somehow—even when hung with the blood-red swastika banners of their new overlords.

Bruning was a scholar by trade and he was here on business. Officially he was a Hauptscharführer in the Ahnenerbe SS, the Society for the Research and Teaching of Ancestral Heritage. Unofficially he gathered things for an organization within the SS so secret it reported only to Reichsführer Himmler himself. Its name was rarely spoken even among its membership, and was never written down, but its desires were commands that filtered down from the desk of the Führer, and its goals were the deepest and most terrible fantasies of every fanatical Nazi.

Before Bruning had joined the SS in 1938 he had been frightened almost all the time. Although he was of pure Aryan blood, he was an intellectual, a lettered man, something which set him apart from most of his fellow National Socialists. In a time when universal laws were slandered as fraud because a Jew quantified them and books were burned in massive bonfires to cheering crowds, it was almost as dangerous to be a student or teacher as it was to be a communist or Jew. Bruning joined the SS out of some dark reflex, something like self-preservation, but his oddities had finally been noticed by agents of the group within the group. Noticed and rewarded, it seemed —after a fashion.

Before he joined in 1938 he was frightened almost all of the time. Oh now, how he missed those innocent days. Since his induction into the group within the group, Bruning was in a constant state of paranoia and fear. The things he had seen! The way his world had changed in under one year! He had a skill, you see, a talent with language which was necessary for the group to achieve its goals. Bruning had studied many ancient tongues and was lettered in three very difficult ones. In

addition he had a skill with ciphers, something developed during a stint at Oxford and his study of the works of John Dee. If only he were not so clever! His mind, which he had considered a blessing in his murky past, now was a terrible weapon at the disposal of the Reich. And although the intangible front he fought upon was won or lost through the study of words, of meanings and innuendoes and secrets, the casualties caused by such battles were real enough.

He had already lost a comrade to this scholars' war.

In his past Bruning had looked upon an unopened book as something beautiful and mysterious, a doorway or gate to somewhere else. If only he had known how right he had been. The policies of the Gestapo towards book burning looked more and more rational to him as time went on, as more secrets of his new masters were revealed. The two books he had studied for them already had been terrible, the most awful things he had ever seen. The writing he translated was forever burned into his brain like fire. The crude pictures scratched into the ancient pages, which showed every depravity imaginable, would never leave his mind's eye. Monstrosities so complex that words failed them.

But what the group was really after were the codes, the formulae, the secrets hidden in the ancient texts—the mathematics which could unravel the world itself.

They were after the secrets of power mankind had pursued since its infancy.

He had only seen one attempt to utilize one of these formulae, from a book written before the birth of Alexander the Great, and it nearly killed him. It was very easy to picture what it would be like to go insane as the impossible happened in front of him. Bruning had gazed over the brink in that bunker in Offenburg, hung one foot over the edge of everything real and sane and then threw himself back to the safety of solid mental ground at the last possible moment.

Others, not so lucky, had plummeted into the abyss. But the experiments still went on.

Who knew such secrets existed? And what else was waiting out there? Even now, Bruning rolled towards Antwerp in an SS car, towards more secrets, maybe even the one which would finally consume him. Or the world.

The list distributed to every Gestapo division in the Reich contained one hundred and seventy-three books, each of which was considered a possible, promising source for the group's special mathematics. Bruning was answering a call from the Gestapo chief of Antwerp that several of those titles had been located in the possessions of a liquidated Jew. He would gather the Jew's library of books, as he had done at least a dozen times before, and return them to Offenburg for study by the group. A study he would most likely be involved in. A study which most likely would kill him. His mind was not as sound as it used to be.

But he had no choice except to answer that call. To the outside bureaucracy of the Reich, he was simply running another pointless errand for the mystically bedazzled Himmler, recovering books which reminded the oafish leader of the SS of some glorious and fictional Germanic past which he hoped to build through forced labor camps and the death of individuality itself. In truth,

Bruning was most likely rolling towards an inconceivable number of innocent deaths. The secrets hidden between the pages of these books could do more than change ideas, they could change or destroy reality itself. But they always consumed the translator first.

So far.

He recalled the flat report of the Walther in the apartments at Offenburg, the way Erich's head had unfolded like some obscene and wet jungle flower, the blood spread about his notes on the ***Unaussprechlichen Kulten***, the way the group removed the body with a practiced speedy efficiency. They had done such deeds before and would again, regardless of the cost. Knowledge was power, and power cost dearly...

"Sir?" The driver spoke in a tone suggesting carefully metered concern. His uniform, the flat black of the Gestapo, was pressed and perfect. Bruning met the boy's eyes in the car's mirror, a serene almost transparent blue, and recovered his senses as the motor died.

"This is the building, sir."

"Very good," Bruning said and exited the car into the humid Belgian day. The squat, lopsided building the driver had indicated was awash with childishly scrawled yellow six-pointed stars. Most of its windows were broken, but the building was guarded by a detachment of Wermacht, and its interior appeared to be intact. Bruning walked, briefcase in hand, across the cobblestoned street, looking both ways as he went. In each direction, red swastika banners hung over deserted perspectives. Seeing his uniform from across the street the four Wermacht men sprung to instant attention, and their leader, a short hairy man, gave a perfunctory salute.

"Sir."

"Sergeant, I am here to search the premises for Jewish texts for the Society for the Research and Teaching of Ancestral Heritage," Bruning said in a quiet voice. He presented his identification, which the hairy little commander glanced at and handed back to Bruning immediately. The Wermacht men parted and all glanced away, obviously afraid. Had rumors of the group spread even this far? Did the men in the Gestapo or the Wermacht know what to make of the list of books or the special markings at his collar?

The sign which had once adorned the door had been removed forcibly, leaving behind several rough and ragged holes in the wood, in its place a freshly printed sign read in German and French:

State Auction
Property and sundries to be auctioned on January 3 1942
By order of SS-Sturmbannfürher Franz Breithaupt
Geheime Staatspolizei Amt/Antwerp

“Is there electricity?” Bruning pushed the door wide, revealing an oriental rug covered in fragments of glass on the lip of a shadow-darkened room.

“The Jew had no electricity, sir.”

“Do you have a torch?”

“Yes, sir.” The sergeant handed Bruning a bulky electric light from his kit. With a click the large room beyond the glass-covered rug was revealed in stark blues and whites.

Hanging tapestries and old blue-brown barrels lined the walls, and each available space was covered in every imaginable thing—old swords, African tribal masks, a portion of a bronze boiler engine, old fishing nets, a dozen rocking horses, but most of all there were books. Hundreds of old mismatched and dusty books, stacked like cordwood in corners and on the floor, biggest to smallest, some obviously used as makeshift tables and chairs in a midnight card game, most likely by the Wermacht men who guarded the building during the evenings.

Bruning walked further into the rickety barn-like structure, carefully stepping around the piles of useless bric-a-brac, trying to get a clear picture of the room. Behind him, the sergeant followed, a dozen or more steps behind, matching Bruning’s precise movements. Tracking the lamp across the far wall, Bruning found the beam falling upon the recently used fireplace. In it, among the fresh ashes, the slagged remnants of the handles of a Torah shone dimly back, their sanctity emptied through mindless destruction.

“Sergeant, do you handle the arrests in this district?”

“No sir, the Gestapo is responsible for that. We just clean up partisans, mostly.”

“In the future it would be suggestible to let the Society for the Research and Teaching of Ancestral Heritage decide which books were right for burning. Could you tell the Gestapo chief this for me?”

“I would not worry about it, sir.”

“And why is that?”

The sergeant smiled thinly,”Verhaeren was the last known Jew in the district.”

“I see. Can you still relay the message?” Bruning shone the lamp upon a pile of books left on top of a old writing desk in a cramped corner. The tomes there had been recently handled, as shown by the fingerprints left in the dust covering them, and the smeared handprints on the desk.

“Certainly, sir. Oh. Those are some of the books that the Gestapo found. They said they were what you were looking for.” The sergeant stumbled over something in the dark and cursed. “They

did not have time to go through the whole inventory."

Bruning lifted the first book after placing the lamp in the crux of his arm. It was a heavy, leather-bound volume from the late seventeenth century. Carefully, he opened to a random page, anticipating a cracked binding or brittle pages, but the book was intact. Dust spilled out in cascading waves through the lamp light as the leather cover let out a creaky groan. The worm-eaten monograph was written, printed really, in English. Bruning's eyes played randomly on the text and fell upon the following words first as if drawn there:

I command thee, O Spirit Rumoar, even by Lucifer, thy mighty sovereign.

"What is in them?" the Wermacht man asked and stepped closer as Bruning quickly shut the book, kicking up a cloud of dust which smelled of old newspapers.

"Nothing."

The Gestapo had done their job well, it seemed. Seven of the twelve books the men had found in their search were on the want lists of the Ahnenerbe SS. Praxis Magica Fausti, The Black Pullet, The Tetragrammaton.The names rattled off in Bruning's head like a vile grocery list in some shallow attempt by his mind to downplay the fear that every one of them held for him, the chilling fear, as if each book he was picking up was a ticking bomb instead of some musty old tract...

They had done their jobs well enough, but still it seemed he would be here for days. Glancing about the room, Bruning estimated more than a thousand books, all told, were scattered here and there among the junk, each one a potential killer, a potential check on the great list, one more reason for the group not to risk him in the deadly task of translation.

One of the Wermacht men poked his head in the door to announce that a Gestapo man had arrived. The sergeant exited rapidly, saluting the newcomer, an economical man who entered without a sound. Dressed in clothes suitable for Saville row, the youngster who saluted Bruning did not look like much of a hardened military man. He looked like a well-dressed farm boy fresh from the German heartland. But his eyes consumed everything in the room with the indifference of a hangman.

"I am Oberscharführer Josef Frank of the Antwerp Gestapo. I was sent to answer any questions you may have about Verhaeren. Sorry about the timing, there was an incident on the canal." He offered Bruning his identity card, which showed a photograph of a serious, sallow youth. Frank set his face, mimicking the photograph, only then looking like it, and offered his hand. Bruning numbly took it and shook it roughly.

"Oh. Excuse me, I am Karl Bruning. I believe your office was alerted by the Reich Central Security Department that I was coming today? I hope I am no inconvenience to the Gestapo..."

"Not at all, sir. It is rare that the home office gets out here. We are pleased to be of service." Frank glanced about while saying this, distracted. His body language betrayed his disinterest.

“This Verhaeren, what did he do exactly?” As he casually asked the question, Bruning placed the lamp on the table and picked up another book. Outside, the Wermacht men laughed and whistled as a knot of Belgian women passed.

“The Jew was an importer-exporter. He held some lucrative contracts in the Congo, if I am not mistaken, back before the turn of the century, maybe a little after. I understand he had, in the past, two offices off the continent. He must have been filthy with cash. Financially successful, as usual, like every Jewish parasite before the Reich...” Frank’s voice dropped off into a sneer.

“Where is he now?”

“Dead. Cigarette?” Frank said and took out a cigarette from a filigreed gold case.

“No. Did the Gestapo seize any papers of his during the arrest?”

Frank looked closely at Bruning for the first time, his eyes found Bruning’s and locked there.

“None on him, except a few photographs. The only reason we touched the books here is that sometimes the older ones like to hide their money there. The Jews, I mean. In between the pages.” Frank took a long drag on the cigarette and let out a bitter cloud of French tobacco.

“I recalled the bulletin—the one about the books from the Society of Ancestral Research, and one of the titles just jumped out at me while we were looking for money. The—” Frank leaned over and picked up a small modern book. “Witch Cult in Western Europe. I came back Thursday evening with the list and did my best...” He gestured at the pile.

“Many thanks. You have saved me a few miserable hours poring through this filthy place. Still, I should think I will be here for more than a week.” Bruning sorted through a stack of modern books which had been precariously balanced on top of an antique lamp, glancing momentarily at each title, one after another.

“No problem. Glad to be of assistance. Anything else I can help you with?” Frank lazily lifted a musty tarp from some sort of mold-rotted divan and considered it, as if it were some terribly engaging artifact.

“Does the Gestapo have any files on Verhaeren?”

“Of course.” Frank let out a grunt which could have been a cough or a laugh.

“I will need them before I leave.”

“Certainly, though it might take some time.” Frank laid his jacket down carefully on the dusty divan and perched like a bird on the edge of it, carefully pulling his trouser legs up before sitting.

"Do you know anything else specific about Verhaeren?"

"Let us see." Frank pulled out a small notebook from his pants pocket, flipped two pages into it and read, squinting in the dim light. "Age: Sixty-one. Two brothers; one resides in the Congo—Jewish as well, obviously. Father was a member of the Communists. Nothing much else. Oh. No family here. Extensive trade contacts with England and America back in the Twenties and earlier... That is all I have. It goes without saying you are free to search the place. We would appreciate being informed of anything you find, of course."

"Of course."

Frank stood suddenly, blowing out a fan of smoke.

"Did you see the menagerie in the back?" His face found the photo grin again when he saw that Bruning had not.

"Oh, this is fine! You will like this. We expect a big turn-out for the auction, after the top men have their pick, of course." Frank excitedly hopped his way into the dark, rapidly moving through the stacks of rubbish. Stopping he glanced back at Bruning for a moment when he reached the far wall and held out his hand.

"Can I borrow your lamp?"

Bruning joined him and handed him the lamp. Frank opened a small door in the back wall concealed beneath an old tapestry. He lifted the heavy rug out for Bruning to enter the doorway with the hand that held the lamp, its beam playing crazily around the room. When he swung the lamp away into the interior of the room, Frank's cigarette was the only light visible, a blood-red eye on the shadow that was his face.

The damp room beyond the tapestry was musty and smelled of chemicals. Although he could not pierce the darkness with his eyes, and the light was aimed at the floor, Bruning could sense a cramped space filled with innumerable anonymous shapes. Organic shapes. Immediately he was afraid. It reminded him of too many things. Frank held the lamp up to his face and smiled again, a head floating in darkened space, and Bruning's hand drifted to the butt of his pistol unconsciously.

Erich's voice, one which would never speak again, came back to him there in the dark.

"The rendering of the corpse is most important, according to the manuscript. Are you sure you translated this word correctly? The chemicals required are vital. Exact proportions are necessary. Are you listening to me?"

The ghost voice laughed again, and died again, fading off into the real world like whispers of smoke.

"Macabre, no?" Frank giggled. He tracked the light around the cramped room and dozens of

sets of eyes reflected back from the dark. Bruning let out a noncommittal grunt, somewhere between fear and surprise and backpedaled, falling down hard on top of something waist height.

"You caught a gazelle, I see," Frank said and shone his light on the stuffed animal Bruning found himself squatting on. Its glass eyes, dead, glinted crazily in the lamp light. Its fur, once a warm brown, was now a yellow-grey, and one of its horns had fallen out. It was mounted on a finely-made wooden base with a small bronze plaque, and the nails which secured it groaned under Bruning's weight. He stood quickly, wiping his uniform down.

"Taxidermy, I see," was all Bruning could manage as he recovered his dignity.

"If anything catches your fancy let me know. Chances are I can get it for a very reasonable price." Frank handed back the lamp to Bruning and after briskly wiping the gazelle off in a cloud of dust, sat down, lighting another cigarette. "Take your time."

Bruning explored the narrow room with the lamp, his eyes following its beam as it maneuvered over the dozens of mounted and stuffed animals left to rot in the dark of the dead man's building. All seemed to be of African origin.

An eyeless ibex was poised in an artificially-coaxed leap, its stuffing spilling from a wound to its torso. A maneless lion, half eaten by mites, held its head, the only thing on it untouched by rot, high and proud, its fake eyes empty and cold. Other animals were less damaged, and some were fine pieces, worth a pretty penny to any serious collector. Back in Germany, to the new aristocracy of the Reich, they would be worth a fortune.

Bruning pushed his way past a single-legged ostrich, almost sending it tumbling to the floor. Behind the first wave of animals, a second sea of tarp-covered shapes filled the darker recesses of the room. An antelope concealed beneath a paint-spattered canvas stared dully back at him, watching his careful progress through the trophies. Another, larger profile turned out to be two small baboons, mounted on a single stand, standing at attention, their humanlike hands delicately held at their sides, like proper gentlemen.

"What is in the crate?"

Bruning's light had discovered a man-sized shipping crate in the furthest corner of the animal filled room, stepping up to it, crowded in by the many shapes behind him, Bruning could make out the faded English words "Jermyn/England" in the thin blue-white light of his lamp. Closer examination located four other stamps on the box in different faded inks, including port stamps from Equatorville, Rabat and Antwerp, each dated within a five week period of 1913.

"Crate? I did not see it. Another piece of the 'hunter's art,' I should think. We did not even know it was there." Frank stood and pushed his way forward to see Bruning's prize.

"Obviously."

After placing the lamp on top, Bruning gave a solid tug on the frontispiece of the crate, which appeared to have been loosely hammered into position years before, as if it had been opened hastily and just as hastily shut away from the world again. A rusty screech of nails cut through the silence of the room, drawing Frank in closer slowly as Bruning moved the large section of wood aside, carefully balancing it on the head of a long-dead okapi. Within the shadow of the crate something rested, that much was obvious, but the light from the lamp failed to penetrate the darkness of the container. Only visible was the edge of the wooden base with its fine bronze plaque, layered in years old dust.

"What is it?" Frank climbed past the baboons and peered into the shadow of the box.

"A moment." Bruning retrieved the lamp from the top of the box.

The creature in the crate was kin to man, that much was obvious. More so than anything known to science. Something in the arch of its forehead as it rose over the intelligent wide-set eyes spoke of secrets, of cities, of things mankind thought all its own. In between the time of the first of the great apes and the coming of humanity this thing and its kind had risen and ruled, more than ape, less than man, and had been left in the jungles to rot by its descendants centuries ago. Of all this Bruning was sure. There was no way to question such a belief, it was just there, along with the stuffed beast, the dust in the air, gravity. The truth had come to him in a box in the home of a dead Jew and now could not be discounted. A new horrible fact had plunged into his world, shredding hope and comfort as it fit violently into place, as real as the thing in the bunker at Offenburg that had almost sent him to a madman's grave.

Standing in a defiant pose, the creature held an arm above its brow heavy head. In its large hand a crudely carved wood club was poised for a blow which would never fall. Its pale white hair, a fine haze of which covered its whole body, was so short that the pink and yellow skin beneath it was clearly visible. In places, bald spots, caused either by poor taxidermy, rot, or nature, left small portions of the beast's anatomy bare.

The face, contorted in an artificial scream of rage, was broken by an oblong and altogether wide mouth filled with flat teeth like a man's, over which the thin, long nose ending in a flare of nostrils was perched, too delicate to ever be born of a gorilla. Something in the stance of the beast implied intelligence; the way the club was gripped, the casual ease of the forefinger and thumb wrapped about the haft of the cudgel, the shifted weight of the front and back leg, all of these added up into a very disturbing vision of what the creature would look like seconds before it split your head down the middle and feasted on your corpse. Perhaps these details were little more than the taxidermist's artistic vision, but Bruning did not think so. It was easy to picture how such a creature could use such a weapon, how it could fashion such a weapon.

Even now Bruning saw them, a clutch of the beasts hunting in tandem in the damp interior of some antediluvian jungle, swinging clubs, using tools, building fires. Perhaps even more.

Perhaps even now, in a world at war.

Frank stepped forward, his eyes shining with something like greed. Leaning down he dusted off

the wooden base of the creature and read from the bronze plaque out loud in accented English:

"Male Specimen, Unknown Primate Species, Called Chimbote in the N'Bangu Dialect. Recovered in Thule, Belgian Congo. 1913." Frank let out a long and low whistle. "Fantastic. I have never seen anything like it. What do you think it is?"

But Bruning could not breathe. A thousand images raced before his eyes, indivisible and fleeting, each more fantastic than the last. The shock of finding the thing in the crate continued to pound a frantic beat throughout Bruning's fragile mind even as the facts, too many to separate and examine, filtered in past his defenses, causing a million individual ideas to connect in new and dangerous ways. Ways not meant to be contemplated by the sane.

Something inside him snapped and fell away. Thule, Bruning thought weakly, offering up the tiny word in some feeble attempt at defense to the onslaught of unwelcome pictures. Good God, Thule. The birthplace of man. Oh God. Thule. God.

The Thule legend was intertwined in the darkest myths of Nazi racial doctrine. The tradition spoke of a land of plenty inhabited by a fair-haired race of giants—the Aryans, who were destroyed in ancient times by a great cataclysm. Rampant interbreeding with lesser creatures led to the poisoning of the race through inferior blood, and finally consumed the great people, leaving their cities in ruins, overcome by hordes of barbaric half-human beasts, the progeny of their unchecked reproduction. The Ahnenerbe spoke of the Germanic peoples as some last glimmer of the genes which traced their ancestry back to that glorious kingdom. It taught that through careful selection and breeding the German people could become as the ancient Aryans were, physically invulnerable, mentally superior, and morally just. Ironically, Himmler spoke of it often, using the downfall of the Aryans to explain the purging of the Jews and lesser races from the Reich. Why the Aryans had not been "morally just" enough to police their breeding was a question the Ahnenerbe chose not to address.

Many in the Reich believed the remnants of that long-lost land could still be found, hidden in inaccessible places. The bottom of the ocean, the Antarctic shelf, the depths of the Congo...

And now, it seemed, Bruning had found proof of the legend. A proto-human beast which walked like a man.

Frank placed a hand on Bruning's shoulder.

"What shall we do, sir?" For the first time Frank's voice was filled with uncertainty. In the unfamiliar situation, he did as any good Nazi would. He looked to the next on the chain of command for direction. All pretense and boredom had bled from him in an instant.

Bruning peered into the eyes of the beast, the yellow-grey irises with their reptilian pupils, as if the answers to his questions could be found there, or some future could be glimpsed in the ghostly reflections on their glass.

“Frank. Do you remember what happened to Verhaeren? I assume you were involved in his ‘liberation’?” Bruning’s voice was solid, stoic and distant—different than before. It was the voice of a man who has buried all he loved and who looks forward only to revenge or death. Frank’s hand fell away from his shoulder numbly.

“Yes, sir. I remember.”

“Every file connected to Verehaeren, these books and the creature will be on a plane to Offenburg tonight, or you too will be ‘liberated.’ This is of the highest priority. Consider it an order of Himmler himself.”

Frank never hesitated and was gone in moments. In his element once more, comfortable in intrigue and death, he moved too efficiently to ever fail. Bruning had no doubt his demands would be met. What else could he do? Shoot Frank and burn the building to the ground? How could he stop the chain of knowledge which would bleed out from this place without ending his own life at the same time? For the good of mankind, all hints of this horror should be erased. But he was a footnote, not a hero. The Reich would have its way with him. If he was lucky, he would die by his own hand.

If not...

Bruning stepped back and sat down roughly, a hitching sob coming from so deep within him he shook like a rag doll. Then it was gone again as quickly as it had risen. He had come to collect one evil and had found two intertwined. Wiping his moist eyes he looked up at the rotted boards in the ceiling and tried to imagine a God who could create such coincidence. One who could construct beasts and man and everything that has ever been, and then put them in place and time, playing the universe like some great instrument, where chance was melody and fate was meter. Some great God floating serene and perfect in the center of everything, causing everything, being everything. But the vision, what he needed, would not come.

Instead he heard the way Erich’s knuckles had rapped on the floor when they retrieved his body, saw the pattern and spray of blood on his wall, sticky with brain and bone, smelled the shit and gunpowder.

From their respective places, each of which had been preordained in time, the animals looked on, mute. Dead. Waiting for the outcome of events over which they had no control. They waited to be moved or burned or sold. But most of all, they waited. Although he did not know it, Bruning waited, too. He held his head in his hands and spoke aloud to the darkened room.

“Oh, Erich, they will not stop until we are all ‘liberated.’”

A hundred silent eyes looked back, flat and unimpressed.

CHAPTER 2:
Hard studies all, which have cost me dear

November 12, 1942: Offenburg, Germany

"You do not understand! We are very close!" Oberscharführer Hermann Weber shook the table when he stood, outraged and red-faced, his lanky form casting scarecrow shadows on the walls of the cramped room. He looked like a grieving father, unable to cope with the concept of the loss of a child, eyes frantic with fruitless worry, hair prematurely grey from trying to turn back time by force of will alone. The papers spread on the table noted only death and expenditures. The pictures showed pretty French beaches strewn with bodies. Naked women washed up like driftwood, eye sockets emptied by the hungry sea.

"You have not been dismissed, Weber. Sit." Standartenführer Eduard Kitt had expected such a reaction. Weber had put more than two years of his life into his Project Black Water out on the coast of Normandy. In that time one of the group's researchers had been lost and more than three thousand of the lesser races thrown into the sea as offerings to Weber's so far elusive species of water-dwelling humanoid. But the orders were from Reichsmarshal Himmler himself and Kitt had no choice. Restructure, consolidate, limit. The greatest secret the Third Reich held was preparing for the invasion of Fortress Europe. The Karotechia—as the group to which Kitt, Weber, and Bruning belonged was known within its ranks—would not be taken by surprise. The Karotechia would ensure that if the Reich were subsumed by the enemy, it would take the world with it in one final, all-encompassing blaze.

"I see nothing here to indicate any change since your last report on the ninth." As if to illustrate the point, Kitt leaned forward and glanced at the photographs, eyebrows raised expectantly. Distinguished, haughty, and cruel, his face was that of a disgruntled headmaster. Kitt's eyes tried to muster compassion when he looked back at Weber, but fell short. Instead he looked only bored and tired.

"Oh, but sir, I have seen them! They have sung to me and my men! I...uh...I have a wire recording. We must follow the protocols set down in the book or they will not meet with us. It is like taming an animal. It takes time...

"We have plaster casts of their footsteps on the beach, and...and even a scrawled note in the sand in Greek." Weber shuffled madly through the papers on the desk, as if his entire argument depended on just this one thing. He held a photo up, showing large and sloppy Greek characters scrawled in the sand. They were written facing the water, and the footsteps surrounding them did not look...right.

"Bruning? I am not lettered in Greek." Kitt looked to the small man, lumped in a chair like an

inanimate object. When the photo was placed in front of him, Bruning glanced up like a fighter considering taking the fall. His eyes narrowed as they flitted over the image. When he finished reading his head lolled down, as if he was beset by fatigue.

"It says: 'Soon.'"

"You see! They will come to parlay with agents who offer them 'the token of blood,' as it says in the book. We will rule the seas through them! Think of it. Three quarters of this planet controlled by an ally of the Reich! The British and American fleet sunk without engagement! All I need is some more Jews, Russians, or what have you—"

"Weber, I understand your difficulties, but the orders from Wewelsberg are clear. We must bring your research team back to Offenburg immediately to prepare. You are just consuming too many of our resources." Kitt picked up his hat and folded the documents into a billfold in a sweep of his arm. When he looked up again, all expression had left his face, as if he had forgotten what they had been speaking of. He glanced down again, unable to meet the intensity of Weber's gaze. When he spoke again it was in the controlled voice of a bureaucrat.

"You are, however, free to continue your experiments for the time being and are not needed here yet. We all still have high hopes that your project will prove most beneficial to the Reich, but your allotment of equipment and men will be reduced greatly." Kitt glanced over at Hauptscharführer Karl Bruning, whose eyes, bloodshot and half closed, wandered about the photographs on the table in some sort of daze, like his thoughts were somewhere else, somewhere far away.

Weber hesitantly sat back down and slowly placed his hat on the table.

"I understand. It will take some time to disassemble the operation."

"Yes. I will send Hauptscharführer Bruning here as an advisor, to make sure things run smoothly. You have until March to close up the project. Then back to Germany for the meeting of the group at Wewelsberg. You may go now."

Weber ambled out of the room, hat beneath his arm, his face as foul as the weather had been the past few weeks in Offenburg. Outside the rain continued unabated, and over the sounds of typewriters and talking from the main hall, a telephone rang endlessly.

"There, Karl, what did I tell you? A well-earned rest. A vacation on the French coast!" Kitt stood and patted Bruning on the shoulder consolingly.

"Why am I being kept from the Thule investigation?" As he spoke, Bruning picked up a photograph from the gruesome assortment on the table, of a naked woman who lay sprawled on a beach. Her arms and legs were thrown wide in unsymmetrical positions and her head was decorated with seaweed and foam. In her mouth, which hung open like an unhinged door, a small crab was crawling about, content. Her eyes and eyelids were gone, leaving shiny pink sockets

which seemed to look in all directions at once.

"The group thinks it best you get some rest. You are too valuable for us to lose." Kitt stood and began collecting the photos and papers, nimbly arranging and stacking them into a neat pile, avoiding Bruning's gaze.

"Like Erich?" Bruning handed over the last photograph.

"Strohm lost himself and we both know it. Go away, Karl. Get some rest." Kitt snatched the photograph and closed it within the bulky file. He handed it to Bruning in a forceful way, as if he were physically pushing away all responsibility for Project Black Water in the simple movement.

"Study it. Talk to Weber about travel arrangements. I think he leaves Wednesday."

"Good night, Eduard." Bruning collected his things in slow motion and drifted to the door. He looked very old.

"How can I help you, Karl? What is bothering you, really?"

Bruning turned back slowly with his hand on the door knob and placed his hat carefully on his head. "About the Thule investigation—how is it going?"

Kitt smiled as if he had just solved a nagging problem.

"Oh! Is that all. You are worried about your pet project, yes? Things could not be going better. We have made great headway. Himmler gave it over to Standartenführer Andries, Stephan Andries, the man who located the von Junzt—but what is wrong, Karl?"

"Nothing."

"Your face just then..."

"It is nothing, Eduard."

"Get some rest, Karl. Get some rest and come back for the meeting a better man. Enjoy the seaside."

Bruning shut the door carefully, leaving Kitt and his world behind. Since the return from Antwerp his distance from the group had grown, despite his new proximity to most of its membership. The stuffed ape-creature and the books recovered from the Gestapo had disappeared after a brief meeting with a group member unknown to him when his plane had landed in Offenburg. Congratulated, but held at arm's length, he had even enjoyed a gift from Reichmarshal Himmler himself, a first-edition copy of ***The Birthright of the Aryan Race***, personally signed by the great man. Bruning had burned it, still in its lavishly wrapped box.

There was little for Bruning to do at the institute, separated from Offenburg as it was. To the members of the group, the former Girls' Academy would always be known as "The Old School"; to outsiders it was the Institute for Ancestral Research. The sprawling walled grounds and luxurious buildings, erected by the local aristocracy at the turn of the century, were turned over to the SS in 1938 by order of the Chancellery. It was only later, during the formative days of the group, that the Institute was fabricated as a front behind which its researchers would congregate and study. Today, inside its doors, at any given time over fifty researchers tore apart the ancient books of man in search of alien science.

It was here Bruning began his career with the group. In 1940, after his induction from the regular ranks of the Ahnenerbe SS, he had come to the quaint little institute to search a book called ***Unaussprechlichen Kulten***—or ***Nameless Cults***—for codes and ciphers hidden within its pages. What they might contain the group did not say, but during his work on the horrible tome it became obvious to Bruning that the group knew what it was searching for, and that, indeed, there were messages and codes hidden within. He had become nothing more than a useful tool.

Bruning tried as best as he could to ignore the contents of the book. It was not his responsibility. But the writing had bled through his defenses, and even to this day haunted him in dreams. The mad man responsible for the book's creation, Friedrich Wilhelm von Junzt, traveled all over the world collecting the filth with which he composed his accursed magnum opus. He died in Dusseldorf in 1840, found rent to pieces by animal attack in a room locked from the inside. Apparently von Junzt succeeded in his search for power, but was finally devoured by the physical manifestation of his lusts.

Of the five-man team which transcribed, scrutinized, and searched the book for ciphers, Bruning was the only one he knew of still in service within the group. Of the missing scholars, only the suicide of Erich Strohm was known to him. The others simply had been slowly separated from him during the project, never to be seen again. Since the project's completion in April 1941, clearly delineated by the suicide of Strohm, Bruning had seen none of his fellow scholars. He longed for their contact, people who had shared a similar misery and grief, who had also read the damnable book. He longed to find them and sit with them and talk of secrets. But it was best not to ask questions of the group. It had a reputation for giving very final answers.

The disappearances and the consolidation of the group's researches were an indication of much larger events within the Reich. To any who still believed that Germany would be victorious in this war, the call from Himmler to Wewelsberg came as a final blow to their thinly-sheltered certainties. The elite of the German elite were coming home to prepare to end the world, if the need arose. And they would not have been called back if such an outcome were not a distinct possibility.

Worse yet, Bruning considered, only the Reich knew of these terrible secrets. Only the twisted affectations of Himmler's quest for Germanic medieval history had led to these discoveries, and no other country on the Earth had enough madmen in power to promote such inquiries without public outcry. The Allies would overrun the Reich with their enormous strength and resources, and the Karotechia would end the world with a power the Allies couldn't even hope to conceive of. It was this thought more than any other which robbed Bruning of any hope, robbed him of the belief

that perhaps things would work out after all, that it would all be all right in the end.

In his heart he knew that the group, if called upon, would do this final thing without question.

Bruning stepped out into the rain, walking briskly towards his apartments through the puddles and leaves, trying to shake off the dire turn of his thoughts. Above him the electric lights flickered to life, illuminating the dull grey dusk with bright white brilliance. Off to the west, near the main gate, a military car pulled in, driving slowly up the cobblestone drive, flags flicking in the wind. Bruning walked faster, turning his back on the scene of German efficiency, and trotted up the steps of his building, retrieving his keys from his valise.

Inside the warm common room two young SS men played a game of cards while listening to the soothing din of the radio. Their jackets neatly folded on the sofa indicated their lesser rank and Bruning rushed past them, ignoring the specifics about them, what they looked like, who they were. It mattered little if the world would be coming to an end and they were of a lesser rank than he. They stood anyway, the two, as he rushed past them and up the stairs, but they did not follow. As Bruning retreated to his apartments, he heard their muffled laughter from beneath his floor, echoey and indistinct.

The bolt slid home. It made him feel a vague and artificial safety.

The mirror on the door threw a reflection back at him which his mind registered as that of a stranger. Black uniform, empty features, gaunt cheeks. He no longer thought of himself as a person, as a thing capable of projecting a reflection. It seemed now that he was more simply a figment in other people's imaginations. He was here because they needed to believe someone like him would be here. They read what they wanted into him.

He followed his routine, removing and hanging his jacket over the mirror and placing his boots in the hallway for shining. Outside the window the upper limbs of a swaying oak tree played in the wind while the rain fell, heavier than before. Bruning turned up the heat in the rooms and sat on the bed, which offered up a muffled shriek of springs in protest.

Directly in front of him, where he had placed it moments ago without a thought, was his holstered pistol, hanging casually off the back of an old wooden chair less than two feet away from his head. It hung there, silent and heavy with fate.

Trying to empty his mind of the images he found behind his eyes, Bruning sat for a long time.

After a while, something in the room changed. Slowly Bruning leaned forward on the bed as the wind shrieked outside. As if of its own volition, his hand found its way to the reassuring butt of the pistol. With a slow, dull hiss, the Walther slid from its holster like a snake shedding its skin.

Bruning held the gun in his hand for a long time, considering it as one would examine an interesting artifact, turning it over to mark all the defects and imperfections, the scratch marks which set it apart from others of its kind. When he had first practiced with the pistol at officer

school in Bad Tolz, an unreasoning fear of the gun had risen in him that the device in his hand had been designed simply to kill. It haunted his progress through the program. The gun seemed to have a life of its own. Sometimes when it jumped in his hand and threw a smoking shell to the ground he found himself watching it and not the target.

But now the pistol was nothing. It was just a machine designed to kill human beings, just as he himself was a machine designed to kill human beings. They were finally equal. After all this time and hardship they had found their peace.

Something else seemed to move the events in the room, and his arm curled slowly, bringing the gun up to his head gracefully, until the barrel pressed into his forehead. The cool metal at his temple talked to him of undreamt freedom and rest. It was good there, he thought, it felt something like coming home after a long day.

When he closed his eyes and slipped his finger past the trigger guard on to the trigger, Bruning saw the blackboard at Bad Tolz. The instructor counted through the diagram of the mechanical elements of the Walther P38 performing their intricate dance. Each component useless in and of itself, together they offered a way out for so many, a doorway through this pain and misery—they were beautiful, really. He could never forget their reverent sequence: trigger, sear spring, hammer release—

The knock on his door rattled it in its frame.

Bruning held the gun to his temple one moment more, feeling its reassuring weight, before placing it carefully back in his holster. A sick thrill ran through him as he stood and walked slowly to the door.

"Who is it?" Bruning was startled by the calmness of his voice.

"Oberscharführer Weber, sir."

"A moment." Bruning recovered his jacket and buttoned it up quickly with practiced ease, opening the door slightly first to check the identity of his caller. Weber's face was pale and his eyes weary with too little sleep. He smiled while Bruning looked him over, a rickety, uneven grin which looked manufactured through sheer force of will, as if it had no real reflection on his inner workings at all. He had seen such smiles before, many times. Bruning opened the door wide for the man and buckled his belt on, making sure his holster remained open—just in case.

"Sit, please." Bruning indicated the chair with a gesture, and walked to the cupboard.

"Thank you, sir."

"Would you like something to drink? Wine?"

"Oh, no thank you, sir. I have been having a bit too much of it as is. ..."

“I understand.” Bruning pulled a chair from a nearby table and sat near the window facing Weber. The wind outside shrieked, the rain fell. Seconds and then minutes ticked away on the hall clock. Weber’s hand traced the rim of his cap in a nervous gesture of habit, flattening the felt on the lip between gloved fingers. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“Well.” Bruning coughed, waking Weber from his reverie.

“Oh. Excuse me. Hm. Well. I suppose...So, you...you worked on the translation project for Andries?”

“Yes.”

“I recall a lecture on it. Here, was it? Or Berlin? It was...about cryptography in the later Gutenberg period. Imperial seals and such. Code-wheels. Fascinating. I was quite impressed.” Weber suddenly placed his hat on the bed, as if to keep it from his treacherous, nervous hands. He offered a guilty smile and a half-hearted shrug to Bruning as penance.

“It was hell.” Bruning said simply and stood, stretching. “I will have a glass after all, I think.” Pouring himself a large cup of fortified wine from the cupboard, Bruning held his hand to the window and peered into the dark. Outside a knot of men rushed across the campus in the rain. Bruning watched them run out of view.

Weber looked at him, searching for something, some meaning in Bruning’s manner of speech or the choice of his words. Bruning sat back down and drained half his cup in a gulp. He offered the rest to Weber who shook his head.

“You see. It is all like this. We think...they think...“ Weber’s voice drifted off into silence.

“Yes?” Bruning looked up, suddenly interested.

“They think we have it easy here. We do not. We...”

“Yes.” Bruning swiftly drank down the rest, placing the cup on the bureau, already bored.

“They think they understand. But this is why I am here. I am here to talk of my project, my hell.”

“I’m afraid I have not had a chance to look through your file.”

“What I will tell you is not in the file. But you will be there soon enough, and I want you ready for what you will see...” Weber smiled nervously and looked over his shoulder at the door, the look a child reserves for the opened bedroom closet at night. Like a sudden convulsion, Weber laughed, a horrible sound like a man drowning, and Bruning found himself interested again. Something about Weber, about his predicament, whatever it was, resonated in him. There was an air of conspiracy in the room, suddenly, like a lingering smell.

“May I smoke? You do not mind?” Weber lit a French cigarette without waiting for Bruning to answer. “We have been having difficulties covering this up, my research team and I, but it goes against the Racial Doctrine of the Reich and the project is so important...I shall be frank, it is the only thing which can save us now. Any good soldier knows the war is already over...” Weber glanced furtively around again, as if some divine force would strike him down for simply mentioning the possibility of defeat.

“Go on.”

“The creatures—they call themselves the Deep Ones—they wish to...inter-breed with humans. We thought simply that they...fed on...humans. You see? And so we sent many lower breeds, Russians, Jews, and others out into the waves, but our first meeting indicated they wanted something more...” Weber’s face contorted into a grin for a split second, as if some inward amusement had played across his mind for a moment. He looked up at Bruning.

“They set up colonies on the surface to breed, you see? They wish to mate with humans, and the damned Totenkopf SS keep sending me men from the camps. They want women. We must...give them what they want. Yes? So I did. I did. God help me, I sent them women...” Weber took his hat off and ran his hands through his thinning grayed hair.

“Where did you get the women, Weber?” Bruning’s voice sounded far away and dreamy—calm, like he already knew the answer and was asking simply to be polite.

“We have taken a town. A whole fishing village. Marise. We made it look like an Einsatzgruppen action, partisans. We closed it off. We killed the men. We have the children. We have to keep them you see? To make the women do what we want.” Weber grinned again, looking up through bloodshot eyes, as if all he said made sense.

“But I had to do it! Soon the invasion will come! Have you ever been to America? It is so vast it is hard to conceive, and nothing will stop them now. Nothing but Black Water. We must give these Deep Ones what they want, and then we will stop this war. We will...” Weber let his head sink down into his hands. He wept for a time like a child, cigarette burning away the minutes in his hand, forgotten, while Bruning sat and considered the situation.

He should report Weber’s confession, but such a fact could be advantageous later, and Weber had many useful contacts, inside and outside the group. He would have to think carefully before deciding his next move.

Weber’s body rocked back and forth as he sobbed. He cried without concern, as the feeling finally coursed through his body like a rod conducting lightning. Bruning watched him and tried to feel something other than eagerness and greed, but it would not come.

The man in front of him was a human being, he thought to himself, a person.

But something in Bruning's mind snapped shut like a trap and he knew this was not true.

Bruning took the cigarette from Weber and stubbed it out on the plaster of his windowbox fastidiously. Outside, on the grounds, a brutal rainstorm rocked the trees and threw the shadows of leaves around on the chilling wet wind. In that same night off the coast at Normandy, Bruning was sure, something moved in the water with a terrible purpose.

"You need to give the project a chance, sir. We are so very close." Weber's voice was thick with mucus, and he did not raise his head. Bruning handed him a freshly-laundered handkerchief from the cupboard, which Weber took and rigorously wiped his entire face, twice dabbing his eyes in a curiously delicate gesture.

"I shall give you your chance," Bruning said, and wondered at the certainty in his own voice.

CHAPTER 3:
By indirection, find direction out

November 18, 1942: In Transit, Offenburg, Germany to Cap de la Hague, France

What Weber had neglected to disclose about Project Black Water was collected in an unmarked, neatly typed report which he handed over to Bruning the moment they boarded the "Storch" transport for France. On the flight from Stuttgart, Bruning familiarized himself with the horrors that his comrades had been up to on the French coast. It was only fitting, his lack of action against the pursuits of the Karotechia, especially those he was involved in only added to the miseries of the world. It was best to know every detail of your crimes, he believed, even if they were performed vicariously by people nothing like yourself. Bruning was shocked that he had made it this far in to the deadly maze of the Karotechia, that his name had not become one of the missing after some late-night drive. It was this fact which led to much of his inaction. Bewildered at all turns by his colleagues' inability to judge his character, he found himself in a constant and pervasive daze of disbelief. He had fooled everyone, it seemed, except himself.

And that was the most important person to fool of all.

With Weber as his "confidant," Bruning had played up their comradeship, their responsibility to the Reich. Nothing would stop them; they would save the world together... They shared wine and plans—both of which were blindly sanguine, and did nothing to better their position but let them pretend together that they had, while time and circumstance marched around them like the armies of the world.

Such optimism during all this death and madness was ridiculous, really.

Although the group had long been on the trail of the mysterious Deep Ones, the horrors of Project Black Water truly began during the Karotechia's study of a book known as ***Cthaat Aquadingen***, or ***The Book of Black Water***. These researches were led by the young and studious Oberscharführer Hermann Weber. Weber had spent almost seven years abroad in the United States and England during his college years, studying archaeology and anthropology, valuable tools which he placed at the disposal of the Reich with his return in 1936. He was added to the ranks of the Karotechia by Himmler in 1938. What could be a safer way to serve in the army while war loomed on the horizon than by researching racial doctrine?

Previous inquiries into the subject of the Deep Ones by the Karotechia involved many other books: ***Unter Zee Kulten***, ***Fishbuchs***, ***Hydrophinnae***, ***Dwellers in the Depths***. These books simply proved to be a primer for the more complex and demonstrative text found in the ***Cthaat***

Aquadingen, seemed almost to have been created for precisely the purpose the Karotechia was pursuing—to open diplomatic relations with the aquatic civilization of the Deep Ones.

When it was discovered in a private collection in Krakow in December 1939, the book was rushed back to the newly established Institute of Ancestral Studies in Offenburg. Initial consideration indicated that inscriptions in the ***Cthaat Aquadingen*** matched some of those found in ***Unter Zee Kulten*** and other restricted texts, and the book was handed over to Oberscharführer Weber to continue his researches.

On December 29, 1939, Project Black Water became an official reality, brought into existence by a secret executive order penned by Himmler and signed by Hitler himself. Its mission was to explore the possibilities of the mystical formulae found in the ***Cthaat Aquadingen*** and to utilize those processes in defense of the Reich.

Four Karotechia researchers were assigned to the project under Oberscharführer Weber. Two of the team were academics with reserve ranks in the SS but who had been rapidly absorbed into the group: Dr. Max Soldin, an ethnologist from the University of Berlin with extensive knowledge of the Polynesian cultures, would study the sociological aspects of the text; and Dr. Franz Mors, a former associate of Bohr at Gottigen with an impressive record of mathematical excellence, would study the formulae.

The two others were SS men who had been in the Karotechia since its inception, and pursuing the same aims even before that, who would handle the actual implementation of any of the formulae discovered within the text. Scharführer Egon Schwelm and Scharführer Otho Lutzen both had served in the Sonderkommando-H, an early Ahnenerbe SS project to collect all documentation relating to the torture and killing of Germanic witches by the Catholic Church. Originally, it had been hoped that this information about the church's oppression could be used one day to cause the German public to abandon Christianity, but much darker secrets were uncovered by Sonderkommando-H's investigators.

Lutzen and Schwelm were both present when the first "magick formula" was discovered, buried along with the remains of a long-dead wizard named Jurgen Tess. They were also present during the first test of the twisted science called "magick" as it was utilized on Tess' remains. What happened in that bunker in 1937 gave birth to the Karotechia, and gave Lutzen and Schwelm experience in an art very few others had. Black Water would test that resolve, and some would be found lacking.

During the early months of 1940 the Black Water team dissected the ***Cthaat Aquadingen*** in Offenburg, working relentlessly to place a terrible new weapon in the hands of their Führer. Soldin and Mors pored through the text, uncovering four "calling rituals" utilized by the Polynesian peoples to contact the Deep Ones. Weber, Lutzen, and Schwelm worked on the actual content of the book and the meanings implied in its often horrific text, trying to put together a diplomatic primer for the Führer himself, in the hopes that when contact was made, a deal could be struck rapidly to assure victory.

The year 1940 saw great change for Germany: the utilization of Operation Case Yellow in May; the rapid invasions of France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the low countries; Germany's power increased as did the legend of its fighting prowess. This acquisition of territory opened new vistas of research to the men of Black Water, and in late 1940 their entire project was relocated to the shores of Normandy in northern France. The book Unter Zee Kulten pointed to the coasts of Cornwall and Normandy as gathering places for the creatures of the deep, and it was implied that something like a city of the Deep Ones existed in the English Channel somewhere nearby.

The German fortifications being constructed on the coast of France served as perfect cover for the construction of the Black Water facility at Cap de la Hague on the channel. Housing over forty people, the Black Water camp was known as the Bootshaus, or the Boat House, by the local German forces, due to the extensive small boat traffic from the camp to the Channel Islands at all hours. The isolating cliffs on either side of Cap de la Hague and its deep natural inlet provided an ideal secluded spot for contact to be initiated by the Karotechia with the Deep Ones. Most thought that the highly secretive Bootshaus was a mining facility, laying magnetic mines near the Channel Islands in anticipation of the Allied invasion. In truth, these boats were part of the more mundane aspects of Black Water. Researchers and experts were stringing the area between Cap de la Hague and the Channel Islands with underwater microphones in the hopes that the furtive Deep Ones could be located and monitored through sound.

First attempts at contact were made on the evening of March 27, 1941. Weber, Lutzen, and Schwelm cast the first three "calling stones" into the sea off the point on the Cap de la Hague on a moonless night and waited for nearly five hours. The sign, as it had been foretold in the ***Cthaat Aquadingen***, appeared just after midnight, when the water out past the reefs began to glow a vivid greenish blue. The phenomenon lasted for more than three hours and was well documented on film by a team of Wermacht cameramen. A small Kriegsmarine craft was even sent out to collect samples of the water while it was still luminescing. As far as modern science could discern, the glowing algae discovered in the samples was a species unknown to man. Evidently a more hardy cousin to Chlorophycea, or common green algae, this odd organism contained an equivocal compound which rendered it luminescent under certain conditions. An extensive amount of the water and algae was sent to the University of Stuttgart for study.

Meanwhile, the Black Water team celebrated amidst the frantic preparations for the second calling. Weber, Lutzen, and Schwelm prepared the second sequence of stones, planning to initiate the call on the 26th of April, and everything appeared to be fine until the night of April 19th. That night proved to be the turning point for Black Water and would lead later to Weber's obscurement of facts and falsified reports to Karotechia command.

It began innocuously enough. Dr. Franz Mors, the mathematician in charge of detecting codes and ciphers within the ***Cthaat Aquadingen***, informed his personal guard that he was going to walk the compound at 9:37 P.M. Nothing about it seemed amiss; it was his usual activity for the evening. According to the guard, he seemed "his usual self." No one had noticed any changes in Mors' attitudes during his study of the book. Indeed, he seemed happier than ever on the French coast.

He was happy for reasons no one else understood.

Mors proceeded directly to the motor launch dock with three pages he had torn secretly from the ***Cthaat Aquadingen*** that evening. When questioned by the sentry on duty at the boat dock, Mors offered the guard a cigarette. When the guard leaned in to have it lit, Mors impaled the man with a bayonet. The guard survived the attack, and later fired a warning shot as Mors sped off to sea in a small boat.

It was initially thought Mors was attempting to escape to England, but once the base was alerted to his flight, and the lights were trained to the water past the breakers, it became obvious this was not his plan. Mors anchored the boat one hundred yards off shore and stood on the prow shouting at the waves in a shrill voice which, when the wind was right, could be heard from shore —although the alien language he shouted could not be understood. All hails to the ship were ignored. After contact by loudspeaker was attempted, Weber ordered a group of SS men to take a craft out and apprehend Mors to bring him back in unharmed. As the men boarded their ship and prepared to launch from the dock, the waves and wind started to pick up and Weber canceled the order. Under the advice of Scharführer Schwelm, a sharpshooter was sent to the end of the rock outcropping on the bay to shoot Mors as he stood illuminated in the base tower lights.

A boat was standing by, still tethered to the dock in the rough water, waiting to recover Mors' body after the sniper had fired. It is uncertain whether Mors had completed his ritual or the bullet struck him down during a lull, but the shot hit Mors high in the chest and threw him from the ship. The second boat immediately pushed off from the dock and sped to the scene of the now pilotless craft.

It is unclear what happened next. Several of the eyewitness reports vary significantly from those of the command staff, but of the forty or more people on the shore, dock, and ships, nine were killed in the pandemonium and fifteen were hospitalized for a variety of reasons. Whatever was seen in the water caused Major Horst Krofft, an Iron Cross-awarded Wermacht veteran of the Polish campaign, to open fire on his own men with his Gewehr 41 rifle, hitting four before he was tackled. Another man, Hauptment Arthur Berlich, could not be roused from the fetal position after running desperately more than four miles from the beach in a dash which took him through two rows of razor wire. He was later sent to the Strasbourg Sanitarium, as were five other men who were present on that beach.

Others simply tried their best to disappear completely. One man, Oberleutnant Georg Friesler, made it all the way to the frontier of Switzerland four days later before being shot trying to sneak over the border at Les Rousses. Leutnant Hans Springer chose a simpler method of escape; he swam out to sea and drowned after being smashed against the rocks on the rough night surf.

What exactly was seen in the water remained a mystery, even in the privately circulated report which was hidden from Karotechia command at Offenburg. Nothing specific was mentioned of the sinking of the two boats, although it is certain that both boats were violently sunk and all hands were lost about a hundred and fifty yards off shore. Several of the eyewitness reports hinted that the ships were sunk by some creature of unprecedented size and configuration, which rose up and overwhelmed both craft with its bulk. Others insist the "beast" was actually a huge hand, the hand of some enormous submerged and unseen creature, which rose up from the waves and swatted the

vessels to the bottom. Most refused to talk of it at all, and insisted that the boats were destroyed by the overpowering waves.

Weber's typed testimony of the episode, which was circulated only within the camp, was chillingly succinct: "The incident on April 19 clearly demonstrates the importance of Black Water to the Reich. No one outside the Cap de la Hague camp, not even those of the highest ranks or position, are considered cleared for this information." This statement threw Weber's insanity into sharp relief for Bruning, and even as he read the synopsis his skin ran cold. Bruning knew Weber had thrown his life away at the moment he chose those words, the moment he defied the chain of command and prepared the private briefing for the camp. Bruning knew also, that he had chosen a similar path by not reporting Weber's deviation the moment he had discovered it.

Bruning's fate had found him, it seemed, and he could feel it. One way or another, such a divergence from the accepted could not go long unpunished. He had nothing to lose now except time. Bruning read on eagerly, searching for his particular part to play.

Hero or villain?

The camp's response to the incident was no less than absolutely deranged. The Black Water group, fearing interference in their delicate project by outsiders in the government, cut them out of the loop and became a separate entity unto itself. Weber and his command team closed off the camp and manufactured reports to send to Karotechia command at Offenburg. In these reports the incident was nothing more than "a training accident" where "several novices died in a boat collision." They hid the death of Dr. Mors from command and continued to file reports under his name for some time after the incident. Soldin, Schwelm, and Lutzen followed Weber's unorthodox lead out of fear, hoping that they could complete the calling ritual and cement relations with the Deep Ones before the Karotechia discovered the ruse. By then, they believed, they would be the greatest heroes the Reich had ever known, and above any reproach.

With their time running thin, the hastily prepared stones were thrown to the sea on the 26th of April, barely in time to keep within the guidelines of the ritual. The camp was shut down for the evening except for the watch staff, and all light sources were extinguished so as not to alarm the creatures. Only Weber, Schwelm, and Soldin were on the beach in the isolated inlet waiting for their moment of triumph.

At 9:35 P.M. on the night of April 26th, 1941, something shambled from the waves and up the beach towards the small knot of Karotechia men.

The creature warily approached with one hand held high, as the ***Cthaat Aquadingen*** had foretold. This sign was the ancient gesture for a parlay between humans and the creatures, and was answered in kind by Weber. In the dark of the new moon Weber, Schwelm, and Soldin watched the hunched thing approach in the loping gait of a giant frog. Although it could not be clearly seen in the cloudy darkness, it was most obvious the thing was not human—but perhaps it had been at one time.

Their conversation was short. The creature, who called itself "Claude," asked the Karotechia men their business in an odd croaking voice. Weber rapidly sketched out their ideal of an alliance between the Deep Ones and the Reich. "Claude's" response was concise: "Bring many others here, those you have no use for, to demonstrate a good faith. I will bring others...next new moon." It then left as rapidly as it had come.

Weber spent the next two weeks desperately chasing down an associate in the Karotechia who was perfecting methods of killing and sterilization to be used on the vast hordes of the Untermenschen—the Jews, Slavs, and Poles, the poor minorities who had been named the enemy of the Reich. This man, Dr. August Hirt, was a Hauptsturmführer in the SS, and was completing his research work at the concentration camp in Natzweiler. He had spent almost four months perfecting a gassing technology which would be used to kill the oppressed in unprecedented numbers. The report indicated this technology was just entering widespread use in the newly-constructed death camps in Poland.

Dr. Hirt, a zealot for the Karotechia, was more than forthcoming. He diverted a shipment of thirty-seven mentally ill men and children to Cap de la Hague by the night of the 30th of April, just in time for the return of the creatures. These people, like thousands of others, were to be sent to their death under the guise of "medical euthanasia," although these poor few met a fate more terrible than carbon monoxide gas.

On the next new moon, fourteen creatures surfaced into the lit bay of the Black Water camp, seemingly unafraid of the dozens of machine gun-wielding SS men surrounding the beach. Some were almost human looking in the klieg lights as they came up on the beach, but others were absolutely alien. These others—huge hulking beasts with greenish skin and large round black eyes—sat passively, occasionally gesturing in a strangely human manner, seemingly directing the more human-like of their brood.

Only one SS man on the beach faltered. When the inhuman creatures began to decapitate the bound, blindfolded, and gagged mental patients, the SS man dropped to his knees and vomited while screaming. He was later sent to Strasbourg Asylum. He would not be the last.

The patients were decimated by the beasts in minutes, ripped to shreds in an aberrant ritual of some sort. Weber and the others looked on in horror as the spectacle played itself out. Weber had to shout down several requests to open fire by his men, and the SS men stood their ground despite the inhuman scene.

After the bloodbath all but one of the creatures slipped back into the sea. The last to remain was almost human in aspect, and called himself "Henri." He had stayed behind, he claimed, to work out the specifics of the agreement with the Karotechia. Henri was an ambassador of sorts, and came to live on the surface, in the camp, like a normal human without any apparent difficulty, answering the many questions of Weber and his men. Henri claimed to have been born more than eighty years before, although he appeared no more than forty, and said he had left to join his "family beneath the sea" in the year 1905. There were great secrets beneath the ocean, he claimed, more than the Karotechia could dream of, but which would be revealed to them once the pact between their peoples had been finalized.

For more than one week Henri lived among the humans of the surface as he once had. He absorbed all manner of information, asking many questions about current political conditions of the upper world. He was very interested in the methods the Karotechia had used to call his people to the surface, and how a government had come by such knowledge.

He seemed most impressed with the pagan underpinnings of Hitler's Reich.

Henri made his people's demands plain. They wanted no less than an entire eight hundred mile stretch of the French shore. In addition they required "surface breeding stock," human women which they could impregnate to spawn their kind. These coastal areas would be run by the Deep Ones, who would, in exchange for women and various future concessions, bring international trade and movement on the sea to a complete halt. They apparently had the population and the ability to overwhelm any type of ship on the ocean, and Henri hinted that the boat "accident" which had occurred at the camp was a simple example of the power at their fingertips. At their command, he claimed, they could subsume huge portions of any shoreline beneath tidal waves and capsize ships with enormous winds utilizing the antediluvian science of magick, which his people had taught to the first humans.

But this would require much time for his people to organize.

Henri allowed himself to be studied and photographed by physicians, and their brief study determined him to be almost human. Except for his hideously shiny and mottled skin, the anatomical differences were minor on the outside, but X rays revealed the ghostly traces of several organs never before documented in medical texts. Vivisection was ruled out, much to the disappointment of the camp's enthusiastic medical staff. Diplomacy, for once, came first.

The photographs enclosed in the report showed a hunched thing with cancerous skin and huge, watery black eyes. Like some enormous fish, Henri's neck was split on either side with what could be described as "gill slits," and something was wrong with his lower legs. Standing high on the balls of his feet, his ankles and knees had shifted in some precise but alien way, allowing postures never before seen by man. Henri's hands ended in talon-tipped fingers, strung with a thin, near-transparent webbing to pull him through his adopted aquatic environment.

In the report's medical study, the bizarre human-Deep One hybrid was described in the reassuring tones of science. Without wonder or fear it plainly stated: "Subject H displays abnormal constructions of the hand. These distortions are mostly in the phalangeal bones of the upper hand. Specifically the proximal and distal phalanges show gross distortion. The bones here have lengthened, and, through some unknown process, exited the skin, now serving another purpose all together as sharpened bone talons."

Bruning tried to imagine such creatures, and found that even with the photograph in front of him of Henri and some of the more alien of his kind, he could not. They were gruesome, misshapen things, whose bodies had been twisted by dark forces beyond human understanding from human to something else, something more. They were there, real in the klieg lights and in the reports, but still, Bruning had no frame of reference. Of their reality he had no doubt; but this fact, which

should have been terrifying, seemed insignificant and far away, like something repeated to him in a dream.

In their study the doctors had already taken the stance of racial superiority, a foolish mistake. Weakness which obviously did not exist in reality was created on paper to unconsciously salve the bruised ego of humanity. The doctors looked at the things, poked them once and said: Here is a known quantity. If the creatures had not exploited this naiveté yet, they most certainly would in the future.

Although the future of Black Water seemed assured, the diplomacy had dragged on now for more than nineteen months. Dozens of "exchanges" later, the dialogues between the creatures and the Karotechia remained unchanged. Nothing had been resolved, and the agreement between the two peoples had come no closer to completion. It became clear that the beasts desired women, and the Karotechia would not hear of using any except those of the various underclasses, which even now were a precious commodity in the Reich. Despite the surplus of Untermenschen in the Nazi camps, there were few females to be found. And it was totally against SS racial doctrine to allow such a thing to occur, using the Untermenschen as breeding stock; but the war in Africa had already turned, and Weber opted to ignore the rules once more in the hopes he could save it all in one bold stroke.

Weber and his men searched in vain through the mental sanitariums, hospitals, and concentration camps of the Reich for female "patients," but had little luck. Many of the female Untermenschen were executed outright due to pregnancy, lack of strength, or advanced age. Those that survived were too few to be useful. Most of the mentally or physically infirm had been executed months before during the end of the medical euthanasia program, leaving those hospitals open only to war casualties from the Eastern front. The handful that survived the cleansing were usually living at home and would be too difficult to round up in numbers.

Ironically, many of the others they managed to locate in state care had been sterilized by Hirt's own processes and were useless as "breeding stock."

In the reports it was conspicuously absent who came up with the plan to take control of the town Marise. Only four miles from the Cap de la Hague camp, this small town was a favorite gathering place for the enlisted men with day passes for rest and relaxation. A large array of coastal defenses were being built to the north of the town by Wermacht construction crews and it fell to the Cap de la Hague SS division to police Marise for the Maquis, the French Resistance, and defend against terrorist attacks. No one in the Reich outside the Cap de la Hague command had to worry about the poor little town of Marise. Its disposition was their responsibility.

On the morning of November 4, 1942, this isolated town found itself in the grips of an evil far more insidious than the Third Reich. The report was brief and sobering. Under orders from Oberscharführer Weber, a detachment of twenty-four SS soldiers rounded up the men of Marise, force-marched them to a field two miles distant, and shot them, burying them in a ditch which had been dug for a latrine by Wermacht construction crews. The bodies were counted, and of the forty-four men who were thought to have lived in Marise, only thirty-two had met their fate in that ditch. The others, it was believed, had run off to join the Maquis.

This left only the women and children to account for.

The women and children were brought to the Cap de la Hague camp and separated on November 5, 1942. A compound to hold the children was hastily constructed and maintained on one side of the camp. Formerly used as a library and offices, it now held a half a dozen finely appointed childrens' rooms, which were run by a German nursing staff. The women lived in another, smaller building surrounded by wire, and although their surroundings were less than luxurious, they were fed and cared for with uncommon decency. Weber made it clear from day one: the children would be kept safe if the women complied with his demands.

Contact with the Deep Ones continued to this day, every month on the new moon, but something in the exchanges had shifted. The creatures seemed more cooperative and excited, and worked diligently to provide the Karotechia with "good faith" proofs of their own. On November 10th, 1942, one of the Deep Ones brought identification from thirteen Luftwaffe pilots who had been lost over the channel. He claimed his people had been collecting debris such as this for many years, and that they had access to all kinds of sunken technology—and valuables.

On November 8th, 1942, fourteen women were exchanged for thirty-five bars of British gold recovered from a wreck in the channel. These women were subdued by the creatures through unknown means, and were fitted with some sort of living jellyfish-like helmet which engulfed their heads, surrounding each woman's face like a balloon. They were then led into the water, most never to be seen again; a few were found washed up on shore dead the next day. The Karotechia believed that these living "helmets" allowed the women to breathe underwater, and that portions of the Deep One cities were pressurized with air to keep surface slave stock alive. Barter and trade were attempted by the Karotechia to gain possession of such a "helmet." All offers were refused by the creatures, who would only say, "Soon you will have all you need."

In addition to the gold, the beasts brought along extensive information about the stretch of the Cornwall and Dover coasts of England as a "gift of good will." The creatures informed Weber and his associates that soon, the leader of the Deep Ones would come from far away to make the pact between their underwater nation and the Reich a reality. The report hinted that the leader of the Deep Ones, a being called "Dagon," was thought by Weber's team to be planning to to appear in less than twenty-nine days, on the next new moon.

Bruning closed the file and opened his eyes. Beneath the wing of the plane, roads spread out like arteries bringing the cancer of the Reich to the defenseless towns of France. Men, tanks, guns, infecting everything like a disease, turning children into soldiers, metal into bullets. The great engines of the Reich converted flesh into prosperity, at the cost of lives. It was like some terrible machine that never should have been, sprung into existence by its own accord, finding nourishment in death. Around him, in him, Bruning could feel the pulse of that machine. Events too large for him to consider blotted out the world, and as he sat and tried to piece together his part in the charade he realized that soon he would be on that beach. Alone with his secrets, he would see those things as they shambled from the waves in the dark of the new moon. He could see himself there already, frozen with fear—he would stand by as Weber gave the world away to things older than mankind.

Bruning placed the file carefully in his briefcase, which was now bulging with various secret reports from Offenburg. The night before his departure he had stolen everything in the Karotechia files to which he had unquestioned access. How rapidly would those missing files be noticed? Sooner rather than later, he supposed. Within the month he would have to choose—a dash for England with what he had, or suicide. The British would never believe him, he knew, even if he made it past the channel defenses. No one sane would believe a story such as his. But no matter how outrageous it was, it was his story, and he had his part to play.

Bruning would not stand by and let evil take its course again, no matter the price he had to pay. Perhaps he would even live long enough to reminisce about the choices he should have made in the past. But right now, as the plane dipped a wing and prepared to land, the past was a luxury, and all Bruning could see was the darkened blanket of the future as it rolled over everything he had ever known.

CHAPTER 4:
I am part of that part which once, when all began, was all there was

November 20, 1942: Cap de la Hague, France

The smell of the sea air cut into Bruning's brain like a knife, instantly eliminating all excess thought with the terrible images the smell brought to his racing mind. Something primal and pure called out to him from inside, warning him away from the waves that crashed outside the kleigs on the light-bleached shore. Past the circles of white light in which only he and Weber stood, the beach was painted in the extremes of night; random liquid splotches of white or black, areas of grey, great blank gaps, places his eyes could not see. The beach was too much to take in all at once, but his eyes frantically tried to search every square inch of it in some defensive reflex. His body trembled and his hands shook. He looked on, dumb; frozen like a statue, while his soul shrieked something as deep-seated and intrinsic as the fear of death. He was on the beach, dear God. There was no escape. Above it all, the full moon stared down like a bloated, sickly reptilian eye, unblinking and cold in the frigid November air.

"One in the water!" A distant voice shouted hoarsely from one of the towers, and a cascade of clicks erupted behind him. It took Bruning a moment to realize the soldiers were cocking their weapons in preparation. For what? Perhaps just that—preparation. Silence drifted back in, and only the monotonous roll of the surf as it swept the shore could be heard. But then, subtly intertwined with the breaking waves, another sound. The splash of something walking from the water. Bruning strained his eyes to pick out the shadow of a form from the black beyond the lights, his ears following the indistinct noises of something as it moved out there, but no matter how hard he strained, nothing could be seen. The noise stopped, lost in the dull crash of the surf, disappearing in a heartbeat like it was never there.

Bruning turned to look at Weber, and the look on Weber's face was so starkly mad, so far removed from any human expression he had ever seen, that he unconsciously took a step back, his boots digging deep into the damp sand. A thousand options reeled in his mind, shaking him to his core. Never organized or realized, they spun on and on as the world continued forward, mindful of only its own pace. To Bruning it seemed he was simply observing as his body performed various preordained actions. It seemed events had taken on a life of their own and no time had passed between the landing at the airfield and the arrival at the Cap de la Hague Camp. How had he come to be here? Why? Why had the Deep Ones called a meeting so early, so far before the new moon when they had never done so before?

"Do not worry. It is not so bad." Weber whispered to him in a reassuring voice through his madman's smile, and for the millionth time Bruning wished he had never surrendered his pistol at the gates of the beach. Weber held up his right arm with a skull splitting grin, and slowly turned forward again to face the sea. A shout came up from the camp then, from behind Bruning, so close

it sounded like the man was on his coattails:

"Watch the left!"

In the dark behind him Bruning heard the sound of men in heavy gear running up the beach. Why were they running? What was on the left? The questions ran around his brain like a rat in a trap, endlessly circling, eating at his sanity, but their repetition soon was drowned out in the lulling crash of the surf, and he found himself searching again, watching the water, dumbly fascinated. The terror was so real now, so tangible, he was sure he would perish long before he even saw the thing, and the feeling brought with it some small tint of relief. In his chest his heart beat double time. He was positive that it could not maintain such a pace for long. He was almost hoping it couldn't. A cold sweat had risen, and fallen from his brow, stinging his eyes, but his hands were shaking so much he could not bring himself to wipe his face, for fear Weber, the madman, would see his dread. That the...things would see his fear and feed on it.

How was it that he came to be here? He found with stark amazement he could not piece together the series of the events which led him to this nightmare beach. Everything before this moment had disappeared in the gauzy, indistinct fog of memory.

The next sound was from ahead of them, from near the sea, and it was hard for Bruning understand. There was a thump—the sound of a body dropped on to a wet beach—and then another louder one, much closer. Only when the third noise sounded did Bruning realize the thing was leaping towards them, covering the distance from the waves to the lights like some giant frog. Just like in the report. He thought for a moment he might actually faint, or die, when he saw the thing. His brain was singing, his blood was pounding in his head, every iota of his being was telling him that this was the wrong place to be, the wrong thing to be doing. But somehow, he stood his ground, heady with the knowledge of forty machine guns trained at his back.

He had spent his whole life trying only to get by, and had ended up in the midst of true evil. Bruning had seen strange insubstantial creatures materialize and dance in unearthly colors in the bunker at Offenburg. He had seen scholars kill themselves over the meaning of a single passage in a musty book three centuries old. He had seen the dead rise and walk from the sleep of the grave on black and white film. He thought he knew what he was fighting. He thought he understood what the world was up against.

And then the Deep One was there with them in the kliegs and Bruning knew what terror truly was.

The smell that rose up off it was tremendous, and it brought to mind the fishmarkets of Bruning's youth. That was all his mind knew to connect to the alienness of the creature which stood before him. His thoughts struggled to push together remnants of familiar things in a rough approximation of the beast, to explain it away as a conglomeration of well-worn ideas. Even as it lumbered towards him, Bruning thought of how he and his boyhood friends would skulk behind the stalls on the Elbe and poke at the jelly eyes of the enormous fish snatched from the murky depths of the river. The catfish he had seen there once—a huge, 360 kilogram fish with a mouth the size of his torso and the flat, unforgiving eyes of something terrible even in death—looked much, but not

quite, like the creature which crouched before him.

The Deep One squatted comfortably on huge greenish-blue haunches, its bulbous head floating above its glistening torso like some obscene balloon. It had hands like a human, except for the bone ridges evident on each knuckle, the skin flap used for swimming between each finger and the blue-grey tinge of the skin. The mouth flopped open like a busted trap, hanging wide, revealing dozens of sets of small, pearl-white, razor-sharp teeth which hung at random angles, as if they were glued in place by inattentive children. Ridges of bone, spines, and other inhuman features distorted the face further, pushing the edges of what could be considered human proportions to their limit. But it was when you looked at the eyes that the feeling of fear changed to pure, alien terror.

The eyes were awful.

Completely inhuman, those black globes glistened with intelligence. Occasionally flashes of light revealed gold-tinted irises buried deep within their gelatinous lenses. Reflected in them, Weber and Bruning and the stark white lamps of the camp were reversed and distorted to carnival mirror proportions. The eyes seemed to draw everything into themselves, consuming the entire world with a glance. Bruning thought it would be easy to just stare into the glaring alien eyes forever. To lose yourself in them and never, never—

"Hermannweber." The thing croaked, its voice liquid and rumbling. The glistening red feathers of its gills flashed madly as it inhaled to speak again. It took two ponderous steps forward on its awkward legs, crossing the distance to Weber with its claw outstretched as if to shake hands. As Bruning watched in horror, that is exactly what Weber and the Deep One did. When their palms touched, a sick, squelching noise rose up and it took all Bruning's self-control not to cry out, to laugh, or to scream at the improbability of the scene which had unfolded before him.

"Claude, this is Hauptscharführer Bruning." Weber spoke in accented French, indicating Bruning with his free hand. The Deep One, Claude, held fast on Weber's hand even after they had finished shaking, as if its years in the sea had stripped away all but the most basic memories of human custom. Weber, finally, slowly slid his fingers free from the beast's grasp, and wiped them on his heavy overcoat, but Claude did not seem to notice. All the while Weber kept his grin, as if it had been surgically implanted on his face. When Claude opened his mouth again a wave of the most foul air Bruning had ever smelt overtook him, and he choked back a wave of nausea as Claude spoke.

"Bruning. Yes. We have much to do, Hermannweber. Dagon has come far to make true our agreement. I am come to work out the ritual. Where is Schwelm and Soldin?" Its French was oddly stilted, but was clear enough despite a severe lisp. Its inhuman eyes searched Weber's face for the answer, ignoring Bruning completely.

"Called away, I'm afraid. They are off to find more women for the ritual." Weber's voice sounded strained as he tried in vain to match Claude's limitless gaze.

"Good. This is good. We must honor the lord. Bring many others as well, for tribute. Those you

have no need for. Enemies of your...race. And females as well." Claude's gills worked furiously as he spoke, fluttering in the freezing night air.

"Yes. Of course." Weber reassured the monster and looked at Bruning in the precise manner of a man going under for the third time—but, somehow, the smile never left his face.

"There will be no...guards on the beach that night. Light no lamp besides. Follow the ritual set forth in ***The Book of Black Water***. Do not deviate from these things or no meeting shall take place. My people have brought these things for the rite..." Claude paused abruptly and tilted his head to the side in an odd manner, seeming to stare off into the night sky. Suddenly the Deep One's entire body was wracked with convulsive tremors spraying Weber and Bruning with foul smelling, ice cold sea water. As suddenly as it started, the alien reflex stopped and Claude continued his speech, unmindful of his bizarre interruption.

"... at ebb tide on the morrow you will find the stones. Erect them here by the night before the new moon." Claude unfolded a single spiny finger indicating the center of the Cap de la Hague Camp beach. "Be sure to spill much blood on them."

And then, without warning, it was gone in a single enormous leap, disappearing into the dark beyond the lights. Despite the evidence before Bruning's eyes—the odd furrowed footprints in the damp sand, the noxious smell the Deep One left behind—even now it was hard to believe that such things could exist in the modern world. Already Bruning's memory of Weber's conversation with the thing was stilted and strange, and his vague impressions were rapidly approaching nothingness through some uncontrollable reflex of the mind. The Deep One was gone—or was it ever here at all? Only seconds had passed since its departure, and Bruning's mind had almost convinced itself that the incident was nothing but a psychotic hallucination. Then he heard the substantiating splash. From out beyond the lights, the last bit of reality which shattered Bruning's attempt at self-concealment sounded as the Deep One entered the roaring surf brazenly, splashing out to sea in the dark like a happy child playing in gentle ocean waves.

Weber's hand encircled his arm and turned him towards the camp, drawing him along as he made his way back up the path to the main building. Bruning followed, stumbling in the sand, numb and without direction, glad to be offered a course of action.

"You see? It was not so bad." Weber's voice resonated with triumph, held in check by an undercurrent of fear. Bruning found he had lost the ability to speak. His mouth scissored open and shut in repetitive movements. With a sudden crash the klieg lights were extinguished, and the blue white afterimages blinded him as Weber guided him roughly back up the beach through the wire and gates.

As his vision cleared, Bruning watched as they passed submachine gun wielding silhouettes who saluted on either side—a ghostly gambit, men whose faces when glimpsed in the shadows looked lost and far from home. Bruning wondered, hollowly, if his face held those same scars.

The inside of Weber's office looked foreign and artificial in the flickering light of the fluorescence. As Bruning sat and gained his composure, Weber brewed a pot of boiling water for tea. Somehow it seemed absurd and unimportant that they had been conversing with an intelligent creature from the lightless depths of the sea less than ten minutes before. But as his body and mind thawed, Bruning realized that all he had seen on the beach was a reality. His mind, braced as it was for the shock, found instead that the understanding of these facts slipped in gently, filtering down to the bottomless regions of his mind like water seeping into fissures in the ground. The knowledge was somehow already there, deep in his bones, and rose up from the black depths of his mind to coalesce with all he had seen.

It was all true.

"This will change all the world," Weber blurted out, brimming with anticipation. Busying himself with pouring and sorting, Weber finally placed a steaming cup of tea in front of Bruning.

"Yes," Bruning dully heard himself say. When he reached for the cup, it seemed to take his fingers forever to find the hot porcelain. Weber clapped his hands and rubbed them together vigorously.

"We have much to do before the eighth. I have to get moving equipment in here, for the stones. We can move in some of the Todt construction crews...And then there are the prisoners to consider, with the three trucks due tonight..." Weber spoke to the room, his back to Bruning, sipping at his tea. He turned suddenly. On the wall directly behind him the white skull of an SS banner grinned over his shoulder, mocking Bruning.

"Oh. Would you like honey?" Weber's face found a mask of concern.

"What?" Bruning stuttered, placing his trembling cup back on the table.

"Honey, Bruning. Honey for your tea?"

"No. Oh. No."

Weber fished out four files from a half foot stack of grey folders and rapidly sorted a small pile of papers from those four folders. "Personnel. Personnel." He mumbled to himself over and over again as he leafed through the reports.

"It is time to discuss our deal, Weber." Bruning's voice did not sound like his own, and the forcefulness of his words felt strange coming from his mouth. It had been some days since they discussed what Weber would exchange for his silence in the apartments in Offenburg, but it was clear Weber recalled their deal.

"Perhaps tomorrow." Weber waved a dismissing hand.

"Now."

The clock on the wall ticked away seconds.

"Very well." Weber looked up at him and sighed. It was obvious that the deal was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. Even now Weber's eyes stole glances at the sheets of paper before him as he impatiently waited for Bruning's request.

"I want the files on the Thule investigation. I want to make sure they are doing my discovery justice. You can get copies of them if you wish, I believe."

"I do not know, Bruning. This will be difficult." Weber grabbed another folder from his desk and rifled through it, eyes downcast.

"No, it will not. You have faked dozens of files to Offenburg in your little sham. You must have someone on the inside or the mistakes would have been noticed by now by command. Someone must make up the fake field assessment reports, someone must alter the visiting schedule so you can prepare for other members of the group. Use that person now. Do not push me. Kitt will want to hear from me soon."

"Yes." Weber laughed. "I underestimated you, Bruning. I must admit it, I thought the favor would have something to do with more mundane things. They are very serious about this Thule investigation. Many of the resources of the group are being shunted to the project. It could raise suspicions. My source, well...he is... "

"Do it, and then it will be done." Bruning said simply, using his dead father's favorite folk saying.

"Yes. Of course."

Bruning exited into the freezing night air, leaving Weber behind to his petty intrigues. If he was foolish enough to believe the Deep Ones would commit themselves to such a deal, even when faced with the fact of the race's natural inclination towards obscurity, Weber deserved his fate. Whatever the beasts had in store for Weber and his men was fine with Bruning. He planned to be long gone before the new moon.

Sentries stood at attention as he passed, clicking their polished boots together in the stark white lights of the compound. Out past the fence and the razor wire in the klieg lights, SS men skittered about in the dark, knee high surf, placing colored flags out in the water, marking the location of the objects the Deep Ones had left behind in the water for the ritual.

The small shacks which housed the officers stood off to the north end of the facility, away from the sea, and Bruning made his way slowly up the steps to his door in the northernmost shack, feeling old and hopelessly out of his league. Somehow he continued to portray himself as

ruthlessly efficient and effective while still remaining human on the inside. Everyone believed his façade no matter how often it seemed to slip in front of their eyes, but only his thoughts of the world outside the Reich, the real world as it must continue to exist past the wire and mines and death, kept him going at all.

He sat quietly in his shack beneath a small desk lamp and shuffled through the files he had stolen from Offenburg, like an embezzler adding up pilfered sums. He would gather all the documents he could, all that he was responsible for, and make his way to Cherbourg the day before the ritual to find a way out. Already he had more than forty highly-classified documents which contained many of the most terrible secrets of the Karotechia. Soon, through his deal with Weber, he would have the last file he required to escape with a clean conscience. The one which was his sole responsibility—Thule, the one case which haunted his dreams more than any other. With these files perhaps someone would believe him: the Maquis, British, or American agents, it didn't matter who. If they did not believe him, he would make them believe.

He would make a difference.

A commotion at the gates drew his attention, and through the smoke-stained window of his shack Bruning could make out two large trucks entering amidst a marching group of SS guards. Turning off his light and placing the files back in his valise, Bruning opened the window and leaned out to get a better look at the convoy. The trucks rolled past and the white faces of prisoners of war stared out from the flatbeds of the monstrous vehicles as they rocked and swayed up the muddy path. When one of the trucks came to a squeaking halt near the internment center, the engine backfired loudly, drawing nervous smiles from the guards at the gate and flinches from the pinched faces of the POWs.

Drawn from a dozen different countries and a hundred different battles, the faces of the thin stick-men who were unloaded from the trucks at machine gun point all looked the same. The gaunt cheeks and protruding brows, the scruff beards and yellowed teeth—it was hard to imagine them at any other time or place, with children or mothers or wives, in any role beside that which fate had decided they would play.

Bruning knew they would all die here in the waves. He searched himself for a feeling to connect with the living scarecrows that shuffled into the barracks like phantoms, and found he had none to spare. Perhaps he was not as human as he liked to believe.

Bruning shut the window on the scene of misery. From somewhere nearby in the children's section, a French girl cried in vain for her mother.

CHAPTER 5:
We all seek what enlightenment we can

November 24, 1942: Cap de la Hague, France

Bruning had kept to himself the last four days, avoiding any action which would take him out into the awful activity of the camp. All day and night the tractors could be heard, along with hoarse shouts from the SS men as they beat and bullied the Todt slave crews into completing a difficult task in an impossible amount of time. Cement bastions were laid rapidly, sections of sand were pushed free to allow a central depression on the Cap de la Hague beach which ran to the high ground like a walkway, and the standing stones that the Deep Ones had left behind were raised in a line parallel to the water with such rapidity that they seemed to grow from the ground overnight, like monstrous trees. Two cement bunkers were laid on the stone breakers which enclosed the beach to garner a better view of the water.

From his north window Bruning watched as the last of the eight sea-smoothed stones was raised by exhausted, stick-thin men with gold stars or double Ns on their filthy shirts. The black silhouettes of SS men on raised bastions stood nearby, backlit by the rising sun, armed with submachine guns, wary of any troublesome activity in the large slave labor group. Around them a sea of the starving men rapidly trundled about, working hard to complete the tasks set before them, struggling in the face of the bleak alternative to success—and its terrible, unspoken consequences, which hovered over their heads like a curse. Lower-rank SS men carrying batons circulated through the grey-clad crowds, beating and prodding those who were unproductive or slow.

Twice in the last few days the chattering reports of a machine gun had woken Bruning from his self absorption as he worked on his "debriefing." Every significant fact and memory of his time in the service of the SS that he could unearth, he typed up on the old, rickety machine with the raised "e" key, in the hopes that the document alone would convince the Allies that he was valuable enough to risk extraction. He had plodded through the last few days, typing, eating, and sleeping in turns, trying his best to ignore the cacophony from the camp. The days were going fast now, and every night above the camp the moon grew fatter, more pregnant. When that cycle renewed itself on the new moon, the Deep Ones would come, and their terrible leader Dagon would bring its tidings to man, perhaps for the first time in recorded human history.

Looking out towards the rolling grey surf, Bruning remembered a section of Paradise Lost, which he thought he should not be able to recall with such clarity. Although he was not a particular scholar of Milton, the snippet appeared without difficulty in his mind:

There Leviathan

Hugest of living creatures, on the deep,
Stretched like a promontory sleeps or swims,
And seems a moving land, and at his gills
Draws in, and at his trunk spouts the sea—

There was a knock at the door.

Bruning rapidly collected his papers into a messy stack and shoveled them in to his valise with both hands. He pulled the last sheet of paper from his typewriter and crumpled it. Bruning glanced back once as he prepared to open the door, to make sure no signs of his treachery were laying about overlooked. He pulled his Walther from the belt holster which hung upon a hook on the back of the door, and cocked it slowly and as silently as possible. When he was certain nothing was visible, he pulled the door open a crack, keeping the pistol in his hand out of sight.

An SS man unknown to him who wore the insignia of the Karotechia on his collar stood on the steps carrying a sealed folder. His face was blank as a mask.

"Hauptscharführer Karl Bruning," he stated expressionlessly.

"Yes."

"Files from Offenburg, sir." The man rapidly consulted a photograph, presumably of Bruning to verify his identity, and then held out a sealed folder which was emblazoned with a huge, blood-red Sonnerad rune—a curved swastika, the symbol of occult power and the Karotechia. Thankfully the SS man held no security forms for Bruning to sign. Unlike other clandestine organizations within the Reich, the Karotechia did not keep a running record of their files outside of Offenburg. Those in the group with approved access simply requested the file from the archives. When finished with it, the file was returned or destroyed. This ensured that, if need be, all records of the group (which existed in only three places in Germany) could be eliminated at a moment's notice, doing away with the common paper trails which existed in other organizations.

"Thank you." Bruning grabbed the folder and slammed the door on the man's stiff salute. Placing his pistol down carefully, he greedily ripped open the seals on the document and spilled the pages out on his squeaky bed. The nearly blank title page leapt out from the mess of other pages covered in dense text. It read:

"PROJECT PARSIFAL (Thule/S.A.)"

Weber had lived up to his end of the bargain. Bruning spent the next hour assembling the

documents carefully, placing them in order with his notes in his battered brown valise, along with an extra pistol and a simple outfit of clothing he took everywhere. It would be suicide to walk into Cherbourg alone in his SS uniform. He tried to picture the situation which would lead to his encounter with the Maquis, or less likely, with British or American agents. Nothing clear came to mind, but as he lay down, his thoughts drifted off easily. A sensation like coming to the end of a long journey filled him with a warmth he had not felt in a long while.

Bruning slept for the first time in more than a day and a half, with the valise clasped loosely in one hand and his pistol in the other.

Bruning dreamt of weapons practice at Bad Tolz. In his twisted nightmare the MG34s chattered away endlessly like crows, ripping up the targets behind him as he ran desperately down the line trying to gain cover. Only the helmets of his colleagues as they hunched behind their weapons could be seen downrange, hidden behind the licking flames of their muzzles. Why wasn't he down there with them? Rounds punched past him by the hundreds, tearing into the targets and spitting dirt up in the air as he ran through it all screaming. But no matter how far down line he ran, the targets and machine gunners kept on going. He ran until his lungs burned and his knees shrieked, he ran until his loping steps faltered as he tried to limitlessly gain ground away from the endless machine guns. With a sudden jerk his legs betrayed him and Bruning spilled to the ground, face smashing into the dirt as hundreds of rounds ripped through the air around him. Wheezing, moaning, he looked up from the dirt as the bullets slipped into his body in a dozen different places, and before all went black, he saw the end of the firing line, a concrete overhang, precious cover, not five feet away from his bloody outstretched hands...

The MG34s sang and Bruning woke to the sounds of death.

Fear gripped him in his guts, and he leapt up from the bed and rushed to the north window, spilling his valise to the ground. In the thin orange light of the evening he could make out the muzzle flashes of the machine guns as they rattled on and on. A dozen or more SS men stood on the recently dried concrete ramparts holding MP40s, as two machine gunners emptied their weapons into the clots of stick men on the beach. There was nowhere for the slaves to go; they were stuck in the run which bisected the beach, a run which they themselves had created. Some crawled before the bullets finally tore through them, some walked about in a daze, but most charged straight into the guns as fast as they could. Wild-eyed and crazed with the knowledge of imminent death, the men had no fear. They would rush up the murderous run and throttle the guards so fast that no one would know what happened. Even half dead with starvation and sickness, the stick men were fast.

But the machine guns were faster.

They dropped like they had simply fallen, as if in moments any of them might get back up and try again for the summit. From Bruning's perspective none of the atrocities of war could be seen.

There was no blood or gore, no screams, no expressions on the tiny faces. Just stick men falling down on the beach amidst the repetitious and distant clamor of the machine guns, and the helmeted silhouettes of those on the ramparts as they watched. The sounds roared on the rock cliffs which surrounded the beach, rolling back in like the surf, and when the guns stopped their bellowing, the ghostly echoes played on for almost a minute before disappearing completely.

Clumps of the dead lay on the beach as the SS men cleared their weapons in the last mingling colors of the setting sun. Bruning looked away as a work detail of more Todt men were ushered out at submachine gun point to police the bodies of their own dead. What were they thinking? How did they feel? Bruning could not find a point of reference which would link his life to the things which lived and died on the beach.

It was time to go.

Bruning buttoned up his officer's long coat and buckled his belt, slipping his pistol in his holster as he retrieved his valise from the floor in one fluid motion. Nothing moved inside him. He felt neither fear or regret as he walked towards the gate of the camp in an authoritarian stride. As he approached the huge double gates, he fixed his face with an incredulous expression and locked eyes with the unfortunate Rottenführer who had been left in charge of the seven men tasked with guard duty that evening. He would bluff his way out and he would make it to Cherbourg tonight.

"Rottenführer, I am leaving. Bring a car around," Bruning ordered bluntly.

"Sir. This is impossible. I have orders from the camp commander, sir. No one comes in, no one leaves until the ninth of next month, sir," the Rottenführer stated boldly.

Bruning's mind swam. All his plans collapsed around his ears in seconds, quietly, as the guard waited for his response.

"Why?" was all Bruning could manage.

"Partisans, sir. We have had three incidents on the road to Cherbourg, sir. No one leaves until Oberscharführer Weber clears it, sir. I am sorry, sir." The soldier's eyes glazed over as he returned to attention in front of the gate, his submachine gun slung casually off his shoulder.

"I will see Weber." Bruning said as he marched back to the center of camp with his breath trailing behind him like a dim fog.

Bruning burst into Weber's office and found the man engaged in deep conversation with another SS officer in Scharführer markings. Bruning assumed it was Lutzen or Schwelm, but didn't ask. He locked eyes with Weber, who finally said, very quietly:

“Excuse us, Otho.” And the man stood and left Weber and Bruning in the silence of the room.

“Is something wrong, Bruning?”

“Why am I not permitted to leave?”

“Was the Thule file not what you had expected?” Weber retorted, throwing his hands up in the air as if he could not believe what he was hearing.

“No...that is not what—”

“Well, then you agree I have fulfilled my obligation to you?” Weber sat, locking his eyes to Bruning’s.

“Yes.”

“Then fulfill your bargain with me. Wait for the ritual. You will then talk to Kitt. Vindicate my misdeeds as necessities for the greater good of the Reich and we shall be equal.” Weber stood and rolled the papers on his desk up. On them a complex construction diagram of the beach showed the firing arcs of machine gun emplacements on the new topography of the shoreline, isolating a kill zone illuminated in red in the center of he beach, where the Deep Ones would rise with their leader in less than fourteen days. It seemed Weber was not as foolish as Bruning had believed.

“Besides,” Weber continued, “we have lost more than ten men to Maquis attacks in the last few days on the road to Cherbourg. The courier from Offenburg is the last one to leave. And the last to enter!”

“Should you not alert Cherbourg command?”

“And bring a division of the Waffen-SS down on my head? While I misappropriate funds and slaves and God knows what else here on the beach? Do I really risk all this for some added safety from ill-equipped Frenchmen hiding in caves? Soon this all will be beside the point!” Weber hissed at him.

“Listen to me, Bruning. I played your game at Offenburg. Now you play mine. I have nothing to lose now, you have everything.”

“Very well,” Bruning said quietly.

“All right. I am sorry. You need not participate in the ritual if you wish. Just do not interfere with my operation and all shall be well.” Weber’s face softened a bit as he picked up the plans from his desk and slipped his gloves on.”You will have to excuse me. I have much to do. Good evening.” Weber said and gestured for the door.

Bruning left, walking slowly back to the officers' barracks as the men on the beach continued to pull their dead into rough piles in front of the Deep Ones' stones, lit bright white by the kliegs from the towers.

He heard the drone before he saw the contour of the plane as it streaked across the cold, starlit sky. Riding low above the channel it barreled over the camp in seconds, its engines building to a huge roar as it passed overhead, drawing the lights up from the camp after it, but they managed only to light an empty sky. Bruning caught the sight of a white American star on the tip of one slender wing as it blurred through his field of vision. It passed within feet of the cliffs of the Nez-de-Jobourg above the camp and disappeared on the far side of the promontory instantly, taking all sound and motion with it, like it was never there at all.

The only noise it left behind were the incredulous voices of the guards who muttered confused questions, the shouts of the men in the towers seeking orders, and then, building, the elated hoarse cries of half dead men, who had nothing left to live for but the hope of freedom.

CHAPTER 6:
A home in dark grass

December 8, 1942: Cap de la Hague, France

The screams of the men chained to the stones on the Cap de la Hague beach brought Bruning out of his reverie. The time of the Deep Ones had finally come. With the elastic quality of a nightmare the time had raced away, while still somehow beguiling him into believing that this moment would never come. His mind turned in on itself to search for some inkling of hope, but nothing came of this banal, pointless self-reflection. All his plans had degenerated into useless clusters of clichéd ideas and all his thoughts circled and crashed into the present without bringing forward one practical conclusion. Every morning he would think: Today I shall plan my escape. And he would wake with the same thought in his mind the next day, inwardly cursing his procrastination.

And now it was too late.

There was no way out of the camp for him. Even now, outside his cabin two SS guards stood watch, as much to keep him in as to keep others out. Weber's paranoia was seen around the camp in other, less subtle ways. The drills, the endless morale-building chatter over the camp speakers, the anti-aircraft guns rolled out onto the beach, each indicated that Weber had severed all ties to the outside world until the morning of the ninth of December. Then he would be vindicated as the ultimate hero of the Reich. Insanity traveled down the chain of command like poison through the bloodstream. The SS men who manned the camp were blank-faced automatons, sure that their post was the most important one in all the Reich, assured that a death defending that post would be glorious and just. There was no way to bluff past Weber's robots, no way to scale the walls which surrounded the camp without being seen and ripped to pieces by machine guns. There were no boats to get out to sea; they had been deemed too great a risk after the Mors incident, and those that had been sunk were never replaced.

The madman Weber would wait for his death with hope in his eyes.

The Deep Ones and their leader would rise and overrun the camp. There was no way an alliance could be formed between the Karotechia and the things from beneath the sea. It was as obvious to Bruning as the impossibility of his escape. The Reich existed like a cancer, subsisting within the morass of humanity, and the Deep Ones preyed upon it like a parasite. There was no question who would emerge victorious from such an arrangement.

As if to punctuate the unreasoning terror of his thoughts, another scream, more terrible than the first, tore through the night. The voice was that of a sickly, wheezing man, shrieking as if he hoped to free his soul from his body through the act of screaming itself—as if he could end his life through the release of his emotions alone, to escape whatever awful thing was shambling up the

beach to meet him from the water. Bruning could not resist. He sat up in the dark and slunk to the window.

Outside the north window, the beach was obscure, sheathed in the night of the new moon. No light shone there, but Bruning's sharp eyes could pick out the stones on the beach, and a few men pacing on the bastions. The star-lit sky hung like a painted backdrop, and as his eyes adjusted he could make out several dozen hunched figures moving in the rolling, glowing waves. He pushed open the windows facing the sea and a cold December wind wafted in, rank with the smell of rotting bodies, the salty surf, and the fetid reek of the Deep Ones and their brood.

A chorus of screams rose up from the dark now, drowning out the soothing pound of the surf. The figures continued to creep in on the waves, although nothing on the beach could be seen by Bruning. His vantage point was poor, and the bastions and stones blocked his field of vision. As he strained to see, a ragged scream suddenly climbed above the others, cutting through the air so sharply he winced at it. He listened with morbid fascination as it came to a final, liquid silence. A volley of foreign words filled the air as if in reply, pleading and screaming and crying in languages Bruning could not understand, Russian and Polish and more obscure tongues. Babbling and incoherent, their begging shifted slowly, changing from maddened imploring to shrieks of agony by degrees. One by one, the voices winked out, like street lights being extinguished, disappearing forever into the night.

Bruning found himself flinching before he realized what was happening.

Suddenly the sky was split by a blue-white light. The piercing star hung above the waves, sinking slowly, playing on the wind like a wisp, slipping sluggishly down towards the ocean. In the sea the Deep Ones swarmed, moving through the waves by the dozens, their hands flung above their heads to cover their huge eyes from the rogue star, their forward advance changing suddenly to a stumbling retreat back into the night surf. Shouts arose from the bastions. Men on the beach screamed. A woman cried out and was silenced by the chatter of a submachine gun. The clatter of footsteps running up cement walkways, the shouts for order and covering fire, the sounds of mad laughter, these intermingled and filled the air with a hundred other noises, each more hurried, confusing and terrifying than the last. Backlit by the blue-white light, the bastions showed numerous confounded shadows, frozen in confusion, or running in fear.

And then the first explosion. A rippling fireball erupted to the northwest of Bruning's shack, slicing the legs off a guard tower and flinging wood pylons the size of railroad ties through the air like matches. The tower collapsed to the ground in a heap, kicking up an amazing cloud of dust which rushed through the open window in one great wave, coating Bruning in cordite and bits of smoldering wood. Two other explosions rapidly followed, ripping into the beach and throwing silhouetted pieces of bodies high into the night air.

Above the body-shaking tremors of the explosions that wracked the camp, the chatter of small arms fire crackled on endlessly, bullets tearing up all in their path. The MG42s opened up from the guard towers, tracking darkened forms as they rushed through the camp. Screams, shouts, and commands were all lost in the cacophony of explosions, and a second blue-white flare filled the night with the brilliance of a tiny drifting north star as the first flare hit the waves and was

extinguished.

We are under attack! Bruning's sluggish mind snapped to attention. This was his chance. Instantly he snatched up his valise and spilled out the open window in a heap, landing badly on his right leg. The sound of gunfire on the beach brought his head up and he saw the carnage on the bastions.

Shadows were there, locked in combat, human and inhuman, backlit dramatically by the flarelight. Squatting toad-like forms closed distances with submachine gun-wielding humans, ripping them to shreds even as the rounds tore through their alien bodies. Bruning watched fascinated as one Deep One lifted what must have been an eighty-kilogram man in one bulky arm and flung him more than four meters. It shrieked. Then the thing disintegrated into a dozen slimy bits, gore and ichor spraying in a million different directions as the MG42s tracked it, leaving huge pockmarks in the cement.

A man as thin as a scarecrow, with mad eyes, rushed past Bruning in a practiced combat trot, carrying a bloodied MP40. It was only when he passed that Bruning realized he was a prisoner, wearing ratty bloodstained grey rags. The stick man breezed by Bruning without even noticing him and continued around the shacks, disappearing into the shadows. Bruning stood, wincing at the pain in his leg, and made his way east, limping at a crazed pace for cover, any cover, as the shells continued to fall.

A submachine gun erupted behind him and he didn't even spare a backwards glance as he slunk up next to a storage shack, slipping into the shadows. An SS man rushed past within four feet of him, unarmed, his face fixed in a mask of terror.

Then heat. Amazing heat, and the sensation of flying.

Bruning landed roughly on a singed portion of wood, his head pounding in time with his heart, realizing lethargically that a shell had just missed him. Next to his head a black-clad leg severed neatly at the knee lay amidst the smoking flaming ruins of the shack, and Bruning frantically grasped at both his own before realizing it was the unfortunate remains of the SS man he had seen moments before the explosion.

He pulled himself upright, the pain in his leg forgotten, the nails which had sunk deeply into his back ignored, the second-degree burns on his face seeming distant and unimportant. He picked up his valise and shifted into a crouching, shuffling run towards the east fence.

More shells fell, ripping into the childrens' section, but they sounded distant and far away. He ran past the flaming wreck of the building, ignoring the childrens' screams, searching frantically for escape. Then Bruning saw it, a gap in the fence, blown open by the shelling.

He fell the last few feet towards the fence, stumbling to a halt next to an upended railroad tie. Ahead of him the foot path to the top of the Nez-de-Jobourg cliffs lead up into the darkness. The rail-road tie jumped in his hand and smoke kicked up from it in a small cloud. It took him a

moment to realize someone had just shot at him. He spun frantically, dropping his valise in the dirt, and saw an SS man rushing towards him from the officers' cabins with his arm raised in a martial stance. A tiny flash of light appeared in the SS man's shadow-clad hand and something whistled by Bruning's head, followed swiftly by the crack of the report. It was one of Weber's guards.

Bruning dove onto his valise, turned, and ran as fast as he could for the path up the cliffs. Stumbling up into the dark, following the sandy, ghost-white trail which zigzagged ahead of him, Bruning searched the hills frantically for the tell-tale flashes of mortar fire. Although his breath came in short gasps, it seemed to Bruning he could continue this way forever. His body felt like a machine, something he simply operated and had no connection to, which would run eternally upwards, following the path automatically.

Ahead of him up on the rocky promontory a single flash of light changed Bruning's direction instantly. He zigged into a clutch of sickly trees, following a overgrown path which was only visible as a thin line in the dark of the night. The slope increased, and his body compensated, high on adrenaline. As he reached the rise before the promontory Bruning threw his pistol away into the dark and heard it dimly as it skidded down the cliff face. He shrieked in English and French:

"I am an Intelligence Officer! I wish to surrender!" He raised his burned hands in the air, waving his valise at the hunched figures he could make out on the rocky cliff, crouched around the tubes of their mortars.

Then he was hit from behind. Something in his back gave way and he heard a snapping sound when he tumbled to the ground with his assailant piled on top of him. ***My collarbone just broke,*** he thought calmly.

His hand desperately clutched the valise, the other fruitlessly searched for his gun on his belt, although he knew it was not there. Bruning spun face-up and was greeted by the grim visage of one of his guards, a chisel-faced blond with death in his eyes. His SS collar gleamed in the night air, and his breath came in great white plumes as he raised his fist to pound Bruning into submission. The punch struck Bruning in the neck, sending a shuddering impact through his entire body, and suddenly his throat felt completely blocked. His breath stuttered in his lungs, and he unconsciously put both hands up to cover his face.

Bruning desperately lashed out with his numb legs and connected with the guards inner thigh, causing their positions to abruptly reverse. Wheezing, Bruning now squatted over the guard, whose hand flashed to his belt in an instant, no doubt to find his dagger. Bruning, taking what little advantage he had, backed away and snatched up his valise from the ground. Behind the guard on the promontory a dozen shadows were now rushing towards their position, drawn by the noise and movement.

Bruning smiled at the guard as his breath returned in painful gasps.

The guard looked once over his shoulder, then back at Bruning and matched his smile. "We die together, traitor."

In the guard's hand, instead of a dagger, a potato masher grenade spit a coil of smoke from its handle. There was too much smoke and not enough time.

Bruning looked past the guard and saw the haggard face of a man, eyes wide with fear and cunning, his jaw overrun by a red scrub beard, carrying an British submachine gun, rushing towards them. His savior.

"Grenade!" Bruning shouted in English and all the shadows on the peak flattened themselves to the ground like a magic trick, leaving behind only the small shadows of the mortars. The man with the red beard threw himself off the path under cover. As the SS guard tackled Bruning, holding the grenade high in his hand, Bruning swung his arm in a wide arc, sending the valise sailing almost thirty feet through the air towards the promontory. It landed with a solid thud next to the red-bearded man. Then he and the guard collapsed on to the ground in a horrible crash.

Then, the explosion.

He was thrown some distance, or it seemed that way, and he could see the night sky lit by yellow-orange tinges of flame, tendrils of fire licking at the deep blue sky like tentacles engulfing prey. When he landed, the information came to him from far away, from the wreck that his body had become, from the place where he once had lived, but which was no longer necessary. In front of his blurred vision, the roots of a tree intertwined with the sandy dirt, overgrown by a vibrant green grass which hung heavy with frost and water.

Someone was rushing through the grass to get to him, but it all seemed so unimportant now. What was he supposed to do? Why? The questions sounded, hanging and dropping off into the ever growing silence which filled him. Bruning found he could not move, and he also found he was not surprised or scared. When he was a boy at Harburg, they would play hide and seek on the Elbe. In the forest there he would find the witch grass and curl up in it and sit still for hours while his friends searched fruitlessly for him. Like the man was searching for him now. Somehow his life had wrapped in upon itself neatly, like a loop, and he was there again. He was here again. It all made sense.

I have found a home in dark grass, Karl Bruning thought, and then died.

INTERLUDE 1:
Everything is in motion, even what is still

November 10, 1942: New York, U.S.A.

For the fifth time that week, interrupting his favorite show as it played on the tinny Philco radio, the power cut out in Tony Lanois' apartment. These days blackouts were not uncommon in New York City. "When you hear the sirens, don't give the Krauts something to shoot at! Lights out!" the posters warned, but outside the window, the lights across Fourteenth Street glared a dim and constant yellow. Beyond them the Empire State Building stood glowing like some geometric Christmas Tree and not a single warning siren had sounded. New York continued apace, unmindful of such an insignificant and personal inconvenience.

Lanois sighed deeply and stood up from his rapidly-cooling soup in the dark. A million things could have caused the blackout in the Hale Building—his building—but Lanois knew better. He goddamn knew.

"Fuckin' foreigners!" Lanois shouted. He hoped the bastards upstairs in Four-B could hear him, but the humming had started again. Soon the tenants would come down with their standard complaints in their standard order, about the lights, about their rats and bugs and all that other applesauce. Mostly war brides, they loved using the power outages as an excuse to complain about his shortcomings as the building super. During these bitch sessions he would feign polite interest, go to check on the power (stumbling down to the basement with a shitty old flickering flashlight), and then the lights would come back on of their accord seconds before he was ready to replace the cocksucking fuse.

Not again.

Like Sherlock Holmes or one of those hard nosed P.I.s on the silver screen, Tony had used his head. By paying attention to all the little details and carefully assembling the clues of the case, he had pretty much worked out the who and where, but not the what. As for the why, he was dying to find out, but that was phase two.

On the case of the mysterious power outages for some time now (in his official capacity as super, of course) Tony had long since noticed the oddities of the foreign goons in Four-B; the flickering of the hall light outside their door followed by the subtle whiffs of ozone from their apartment; the shouts and clangs and the low-pitched hum which seemed to thrum throughout the whole building, but only when they were at home; all the visitors and weird contraptions they were dragging up the stairs at all hours. Something screwy was going on up there, that much was sure.

In retrospect, he had known they would be trouble when he rented the unit to them three months

before. But hey, the two men had paid in cash for the first year. In fuckin' full. What was he going to do? Turn them down? There was a war on, after all.

He didn't care if they were nancy boys or wetbacks, as long as they had money and were quiet. But what were they up to up there? You had to be careful these days. The man next door could be a spy for the Axis. Tony had seen a Republic serial not three days ago uptown, where Nazi agents had constructed a death beam using radio parts to disintegrate Manhattan. Hell, if it hadn't been for Captain Midnight, they would have done it too. He knew it wasn't anything like that, though. Probably only some type of wetback radio, but what for? To pick up transmissions from Cuba or wherever it was they came from?

Or to broadcast, maybe?

Suddenly, shattering his reverie, a strange noise drifted down from above. An intertwining conglomeration of muffled voices raised in a sing-song chanting which he had never heard before filtered through the other sounds of the New York night. Their remote voices recited something over and over again, which put Tony in mind of Mass at St. Patrick's on Christmas Eve. But it wasn't the "Our Father" they were repeating.

"Cocksucking heathens," he whispered to himself, and tip-toed to the front closet, where he carefully removed an ancient, time-worn baseball bat. Tony was a big guy and he easily outweighed the two wetbacks put together, but hey, he was older, and anyway—two on one? Not his style. He had been involved in too many street fights as a kid not to know that things can go very wrong very quickly in any brawl. Where he came from—Long Island City—the baseball bat was the great equalizer. With its reassuring weight gripped tightly in his left hand, Tony skulked to the hall table, searching through a bundle of marked passkeys until he found the one he was looking for. Goddamn it, it was going to end tonight, he thought, and savored the feeling of power the thought brought to him. He slipped out into the darkened hallway to dish out some two-fisted justice, with a little help from his bat.

The hall was black as pitch, but he didn't risk a flashlight. Instead, by memory, he rapidly made his way to the stairs and rushed up them, hoping the noise would not carry up to four and alert the wetbacks. He paused at the door to the fourth-floor hallway and considered his options, but something suddenly struck him as wrong. The light was wrong...

A greenish, spectral radiance was spilling from beneath the crack of the door.

In the darkness of the staircase, the light from the beneath the doorframe looked bizarre, eerie almost, like the stories of ball lightning his dad had told him in childhood. Tony slipped open the door slowly and marveled at the ghostly beams which danced about the walls of the hallway. The bat hung forgotten in his hand as he stepped through. Flashing in intervals, the ghastly aurora which seeped from beneath the door of apartment Four-B illuminated every square inch of the hall somehow, even areas that should have been concealed in shadow. Something about the shadows of the hall looked...unnatural almost.

When the chant came up again, much closer now, Tony raised the bat and his heart picked up a

sudden frantic pace. Somehow this didn't seem like too much fun now, stalking up a hallway in a blacked-out apartment with that strange light coming from beneath the door. Especially with that door his final destination. All the joy of his quest for justice had fled the moment he had touched the doorknob and felt the bizarre vibration again. Even now, he watched the darkened light fixture above Four-B rattle so swiftly that the small glass chips which hung from it tinkled like a wind chime.

Something in his head ached. As he reached the apartment door he switched the bat from hand to hand, stalling, not really sure of his next action. Shadows backlit from inside the apartment overflowed from beneath the door jamb on to the far wall, casting strange squat forms on the blue-white wallpaper.

"To those who came before, to those who will come after..."

"Everything is in motion, even what is still." The voices murmured in unison from inside Four-B and Tony felt all the spit instantly disappear from his mouth. His heart, already hammering away rapidly, tripped over double-time, racing faster than he ever thought it could. He didn't precisely know why, but he was scared, more scared than he had ever been before. Even when he had been in combat way back in dim old 1918, with those damn Kraut bullets flying through the air as thick as August mosquitoes, he hadn't felt nearly as afraid as he did now. But why?

"Something's wrong," he mumbled to himself, and carefully pressed his head to the door. It thrummed with an unnatural vibration. Inside, a agglomeration of voices babbled away, and it was difficult for Tony to pick out individual strands of conversation from the morass of noise. He heard, or thought he heard, laughter and crying buried somewhere in there among a humming, high-pitched whine, and a dozen or more voices talking of odd things he did not understand.

"...soon, a charge is almost there..."

"...thirty-five seconds..."

"...hold the child..."

"...turn it off..."

The lights in the hall snapped to life, causing Tony to leap back from the door with a hoarse shout. From within the apartment, the terrible, bone-shaking thrumming continued to climb, masking his cry in its terrible bass pounding. Tony's head throbbed out of time with the whine like a drum.

They had a kid in there.

Something was damn wrong. His trembling hand slipped the passkey into the rattling lock, and the action brought to mind memories of crawling to the edge of the trench, bayonet at the ready, preparing to rush the German lines. Something in the act of turning the key in the lock spoke of

terrible finality.

He had been scared there on the Marne, fixing his bayonet to bury in the guts one of the Kaiser's boys, but now as he swung the door open in to the unknown, he almost ached for that long-ago time. Something told him he had been safer rushing a field sprayed with machine gun rounds than he would be if he entered the room.

The door swung wide slowly, and Tony Lanois gained the first glimpse of Four-B he'd had in three months.

Hundreds—no, thousands—of wires traced looping routes over the sparse furniture, tracking up walls, on windowsills, under rugs to a central table which occupied the exact middle of the living room. On it, a device the size of a large typewriter sat adorned with spinning metal rods and pistons in bizarre configurations. On these pistons, small mirrors were fixed, etched in odd geometric forms, reflecting back a rapidly fading ghostly light produced from somewhere within the slowing machine. A small child, a boy or a girl (Tony could not tell from the back), sat on a small piano bench. Its head was placed carefully in front of the machine on a chin brace, like one of those headrests for the hand-crank penny Nickelodeons. What the device was, Tony had no idea, but is sure as hell didn't look like a radio.

Other bizarre contraptions dotted the room, each connected by huge masses of wires to the central device. These peripheral machines looked like the cannibalized remains of more than a hundred radios, stapled and glued and flattened onto boards which held dimly glowing tubes, rotating fans and snapping electrodes by the dozens.

It was then that the men in the room noticed him. Tony only recognized two of the five men in the room, the wetbacks he had rented the place to. Besides the two known quantities, three other olive-skinned men, who wore disheveled clothes and bland expressions, stood near the machine. They all turned to face Tony as he stepped into the room. With a click, suddenly the gadget on the table stopped. The terrible thrumming in the air stopped just as suddenly and the moment seemed to hang suspended in the air like time itself had ceased to exist. No one moved for a long time.

"The kid's coming with me," Tony said, and raised the bat menacingly. He struck one of the boards of glass tubes nearest him to demonstrate his willingness to inflict mindless violence, and it made a satisfying crash as the bulbs on it blew. Not one man in the room flinched. The child did not even move from its chair. The usual tell-tale signs of fear were not to be found on any of the strangely emotionless faces of the group.

"Uh..." Tony said in a small voice.

The child abruptly rose from the chair and turned to face him in stuttering, automaton-like movements. It was a small boy wearing knickers and old, worn shoes. He looked like a million other kids Tony saw every day in his walks to Washington Square; his face was filthy, covered in dirt and scratches, but his eyes were a luminous and beautiful green. The nails were bitten ragged, his knees scuffed and dirty, his hair tousled and a little wet. But something about the child was wrong. The little boy's face was fixed and relaxed at the same time, like it held a purposely mild

expression by sheer willpower alone.

"C'mere, kid," Tony said in an unsteady voice, and reached out his right hand.

The look on the child's face held nothing human in it.

"Kill it," the child said in a monotone voice, studying Tony like he was a captured insect waiting to be pinned and mounted. The last thing Tony Lanois ever saw was one of the men in the room produce a shiny silver object from a nearby windowsill. It looked absurdly like a vacuum cleaner with a flat cleaning head. The thin, gleaming object settled into the shoulder of the man with a practiced ease, held so that the flat end pointed at Tony like the muzzle of a rifle.

What? Tony thought, as the bright, white light exploded and the smell of burning flesh filled the room.

Then he was gone.

The child shut the apartment door carefully, but in a strange manner, as if the act was alien but the concept itself was understood. As it shut, the ashes and slagged fillings that were once the building superintendent swept back into the hallway. Outside, New York continued apace, unmindful of such an insignificant and personal inconvenience.

PART TWO:
Judging Distances

CHAPTER 7:
And my brother is part of the ocean

December 26, 1942: London, United Kingdom

Thomas Arnold wore no uniform or insignia as he entered the Joint Intelligence Command on Cable Street, just a battered, muddy, long coat which still had flakes of snow on the collar. He let the wind slam the door behind him. His face was empty of emotion and unshaven for weeks, with a striking red beard two shades darker than his short, curly hair. He looked like some sort of wayward traveler, as he always did, confused and a bit off kilter. In truth he was as deliberate as death itself. His wide shoulders and barrel chest stretched his long coat out so his shoulder holster was plainly visible under the wet jacket. This drew no scrutiny. He was well known here.

In the overheated front hall he surrendered his .45 automatic to the military policeman at the security door and offered up his fresh OSS identification card to the clerk at the desk, who rapidly checked it against a mimeographed sheet and opened a book like a hotel registry. In a small photo on the card, a fresh faced, clean shaven Thomas Arnold looked back, six months younger. Piles of wood crates lined the cramped room and dust slowly drifted in the musty air.

"I was very sorry to hear about your brother, sir," the clerk said in a clipped Harvard accent as he scribbled Thomas' name in the book. He handed back his folded identity card. How he had found out about Lucas' death, Thomas had no idea, but it really wasn't a surprise. After all, everyone he knew here worked for military intelligence. It was a short grapevine.

He pushed it all away, the nostalgia and pain, and looked the clerk in the eyes.

"So was I," Thomas said, without a hint of irony, and headed up the stairs, pushing his way past a clot of clerks moving the hulks of old typewriters up to the offices. It seemed things were finally coming together in London for the fledgling Office of Strategic Services. Soon their entire program would be up to speed and the OSS could begin in earnest to harass the enemy, instead of harassing its Allies like a bothersome child begging for scraps from the international intelligence table. Only fourteen American agents had been inserted into the European theater of operations so far, with the cooperation of the British navy, and First Lieutenant Thomas Arnold had been one of them, thank you very much. In fact, he had just finished almost two months on a "French holiday" in Normandy, at a quaint little out-of-the-way stop called the Cap de la Hague. It was less than picturesque, but he took lots of photos anyway. Unfortunately, they were all classified.

It had all gone perfectly, without a hitch, the first mission of the OSS in the European Theater—his mission. Wading ashore through the freezing surf of France, Arnold was scared. Having never killed before was a difficult obstacle to overcome for a professional soldier, and imagining the instant death or slow triumph possible in the midst of battle still made him queasy. But once you were briefed for DELTA GREEN clearance, the concept of combat didn't seem so bad anymore. Shelling an enemy camp from the heights of a cliff? Sure. Killing women and children in the bargain? Hey, no problem. When you read the briefing for Lt. Commander Cook's little DELTA GREEN psychological warfare unit, and learned to regard what it had to say as truth, you'd be willing to consider putting a couple slugs in your mother so long as you didn't have to read any further. Once you saw the things from Cook's briefing walking and talking to the Krauts, though—after that, putting one in yourself didn't seem like such a bad idea, either.

But Arnold hadn't considered suicide after he found out that the unbelievable crap the OSS had been shoveling him was on the level after all. He just did his duty. Not for General Donovan, or for his dad or Lucas. He did it in spite of them, to prove to someplace within himself that he was more than the sum of his experiences, that without the outside motivations of his family and friends he would still move forward in the right direction. Above all, he did it because he was trained to do it. He was supposed to do it.

Arnold unlocked his office, switched on the lights, and tried to push the bad thoughts away. It took more effort than he could believe. Sinking into his chair he tried to completely clear his mind. He spun the safe tumbler with the ease of habit, opening the thick door to reveal a clump of papers. He removed three tan files marked TOP SECRET and placed them on his desk, shutting the safe door behind him. Leaning back in the creaky chair, Arnold looked up at the blue-white light of the lightbulb and tried to envision the way things would continue from this point onward. There was no past. The future was on the table. He was a zero sum. This was the beginning.

After a while, his mind drifted.

Soon General Donovan would return to London and things could begin for real. It seemed like forever since Arnold began his work for William "Wild Bill" Donovan, as if the world was a completely different place than when he started out in the service. In truth, the world had changed very little, but Arnold had changed a whole hell of a lot. He was hardly the same man he had been that bright day in 1940 when he showed up for his first day of work at the Research and Analysis Department in New York. He had killed God knows how many people in France, and he was now short one brother. Life throws some curves, huh?

When Donovan had been appointed the Coordinator of Information for President Roosevelt, Arnold had been there, just out of officers' school at Camp Abbot and on his way to boogie woogie through his father's footsteps. Fresh with his degree in political science from the University of Los Angeles, and his Bronze Medal in the breast stroke from the '36 games (which looked more and more like the last Olympics that would ever be held), he showed up for his first assignment bright eyed and eager with a suitcase full of gear, a few photos, a commission and not a lot else. When his father died in January '39, Arnold had stepped in to fill the void, taking the burden of his large family on his rather young and inexperienced shoulders without a second

thought.

Colonel Roger Arnold was a bit of a legend in Washington. Thomas Arnold could still see the way older military personnel perked up when they recognized his name and searched his face for his father's stern sense of command. The Colonel had a checkered past. He possessed an indomitable spirit and an unimpeachable love for America; even his enemies grumbled grudging acknowledgment of his nationalistic fervor. After spending his youth fighting revolutionary Mexicans and imperialistic Germans for Uncle Sam, the Colonel moved on to serve President Wilson as a military advisor in the turbulent early Thirties. In more recent years Colonel Arnold commanded Camp Talbot in Northern California, where he railed on and on about the evils of the New Deal and its architect, Roosevelt, always ending his tirades with the required "but he is our commander-in-chief, after all...." Thomas Arnold did not actually miss the man, but he missed the concept of such a man existing in a hard-headed world. It was somehow reassuring. To Thomas his father still seemed too mythical a figure ever to be cut down by a simple heart attack, but that was the sad truth. There was nothing anyone could do except offer their condolences.

At the Colonel's funeral a rather squat and homely man in expensive civilian clothes sidled over to Thomas and introduced himself as "Billy" Donovan, a good friend and former colleague of his father, and by the way, aren't you off to officer's school? If you ever need a job...

And he did, it turned out. The family house in Dunsmuir wasn't paid up, his mother tearfully told him after the funeral. All the family's savings had been squandered in the Crash and in trying to recover from the Crash, and on top of that Lucas would be heading to Berkeley in 1941. So Thomas Arnold got on with it and joined the army. He sent almost everything he earned back home every three weeks. It made him feel good to give something back.

His commission took him to New York to brush up on the economies of the war powers for General Donovan in April 1940. During that fine New York summer headlining Project GEORGE, Arnold read books on European economies, wrote profiles on industrialists, studied French and German and spent a lot of time in Central Park, admiring the skirts and eating hot dogs. Occasionally he caught a skirt or a Dodgers game (sometimes both at the same time) to break up the monotony. He was young, bored, and yearning for something to give his life meaning. It would not be long coming.

There was a time in his life when he thought that the meaning of life would be found in the love of a girl. Now, in London, such a simple wish seemed completely alien. It was like a bad taste in his mouth. Since Pearl Harbor, everything good about his life had been tossed out the window to make room for the necessary evils of war.

Ever since that Sunday last December, Thomas's life had tripped over into some alternate world where everything worked in fast forward. Months shuffled by like stations passing an express train, shooting through his life at breakneck speeds, disappearing into the past before he could take a good look at them. In Maryland at Area A he trained for covert operations, putting his athlete's body to the test, becoming a skilled troublemaker and sneak who could blow up a bridge and then lie his way out of harm's way in three languages. In Maryland he learned "Billy" Donovan had special plans for him, plans that involved a psychological warfare division of the

newborn OSS code-named DELTA GREEN, and in Maryland his mom's letter informed him that his little brother Lucas had run off to join up for army service.

After that, it was all madness.

Before the war he was not a violent man, but he found a reservoir of will inside him to make himself a killer, a portion of himself he put to the test in France for the first time. He discovered what he believed about himself was essentially true—there was a thin shell of civility wrapped around a heartless machine that would do what had to be done, no matter the cost. A shell that was like the illusion he now knew the world to be.

Then came that cold day in February in 1942, the briefing by Lt. Commander Cook. He could not remember how it started or when it ended, or if it really even ended at all. Sometimes it felt like it was still going on. That was the first day he read of intelligent creatures from beneath the sea, of a Massachusetts town called Innsmouth, of things man could not explain away with slide-rules or special relativity, typed up in the earnest tones of a report that had been written by a Marine major general and initialed by General William H. Donovan himself.

Arnold had sat in the office in Washington and considered the black and white photos of inhuman creatures that even now still lived in military custody. With a dull sense of wonder he felt his mind desperately trying to find and hold on to new and terrible facts—he could feel those new facts slip away from his mental grasp, crashing about his mind like a bull in a china shop, leaving a trail of wrecked thoughts, wishes and dreams in their path. Even back then, when he had not truly believed the reports, not deep down, it still hurt to think about them. Back then he could still shrug it off as an unpleasant sham, a test, despite the photos and films, the medical files, the recordings, and the men beyond reproach who told him these things were real while wearing expressionless faces.

But now he knew it was all real. He had seen those sea-things in the flesh himself.

He opened the folder on the desk and considered it for a while, a crease of concentration riding his brow. A man had died trying to do the right thing that night on the Nez-de-Jobourg cliffs, and now Arnold paged through the dead man's translated documents. It was amazing. They had been typed in France by a German, captured by an American, and translated by a Brit. The papers had lived a fuller life than most men. Everything that Cook and Donovan feared most was revealed in fifty-three pages of type, sprinkled with raised e's, along with forty-three swastika-emblazoned files. The secrets of the Third Reich unfolded in the notes of a dead man like some cheap magic trick. Somewhere Cook was reading a copy of the report Arnold had in front of him, cursing his luck and plotting. Donovan would be ready to pledge anything to the effort now. Once Donovan got President Roosevelt alone to bend his ear, forget it. DELTA GREEN had shifted from an obscure concern to the most important division in the American war effort in Europe.

The entire war had changed, now, because the Nazis knew. They fucking knew everything. And worse yet, they had a head start. Their little crew, their Karotechia, had been sinking its teeth into the occult for more than four years, and DELTA GREEN was far, far behind the curve. Maybe too far behind to ever catch up. Arnold refused to let the thought sit and fester. He rooted it out with

the image of the crumpled, burned form of the dead Nazi officer he had left on the cliffs of the Nez-de-Jobourg. The look of peace on the man's ruined face, the way he had struggled and rushed and fought to get these documents out, despite the depth of his situation, to his very last breath, even, left Arnold ashamed and scared. Could he ever match such an act of will?

The valise he had found on the cliffs had obviously been meant for Allied hands. The careful arrangement of its contents, the classified Nazi documents, the typed confession explaining every aspect of their occult research program, all told of a man who saw what was wrong and tried to make it right. The hero of the situation had been a man named Karl Bruning, a man with a skill that had been turned against him, a man who, like Arnold, struggled despite being out of his depth. Arnold only hoped he performed as well as Bruning had when his last moments came.

The phone chattered. Arnold flipped through the folder until he found the photograph of Bruning, looking distant and austere and far away. Bruning's chin was chiseled and clean shaven, his hair was clipped and blond, his black SS uniform was ironed and perfect. In all respects he appeared the perfect Aryan, the perfect Nazi, but something was there that Arnold could see that the Reich had not touched. Something which made Bruning human. Arnold's eyes drifted down to the last page of the document and read:

> **Now, there is nothing left to say except I am sorry for having burdened you with these secrets.**
> **Hauptscharführer Karl Bruning, Ahnenerebe SS**

The phone continued to chatter as Arnold closed the folder. He carefully placed the three folders back within the safe and turned slowly around the room, his mind full of random images. His brother Lucas in long johns, jumping up and down on an old mattress. His father in uniform one California morning, backlit by the sun. Monsters stumbling from the waves in the French night like madmen.

The telephone stopped ringing and the room settled into a thick silence. He sat down in the creaky chair slowly, listening to his knees pop and wincing at the aching in his legs. Arnold wished somehow he could tell Bruning that it had all worked out all right, that he had done his duty to humanity, that the burden of secrets had been successfully passed. Arnold twisted his class ring around his finger and considered the blank wall, his face empty.

The phone began to ring again, crying like a petulant child, but Arnold just continued to stare. If it was bad enough, he knew, they would call back.

“Merry Christmas, Tom,” Lieutenant Commander Martin Cook said, distracted. The little man was crouched behind a mountain of paperwork, rapidly crossing sections out on a report with a censor marker.

“Yeah. You, too,” Arnold mumbled and sat down in a huge, overstuffed leather chair. The room in the Joint Intelligence Headquarters suited Cook. It was decorated in early English librarian. Dozens of titles, most of which Arnold would lay even money never had left the shelves (at least not in Cook’s hands), covered every available space on the walls. Behind Cook’s head, a window taped and filled with sandbags ruined the illusion of a cloistered study.

“The general will be here in a few minutes along with the rest. I wanted to talk to you alone for a minute.” Cook looked up through bloodshot, squinty eyes. Every time Arnold looked at the man, all he could think about were strange dogs bred for idle amusement. Cook’s face was a maze of furrows and wrinkles, with jowls like a bulldog and deep-socketed eyes that somehow managed to look tired and alert at the same time. Before Arnold could smile, he bit his lip and looked away.

“Uh...sure, sir. What is it?”

“I, um...heard about your brother. Me and Bill, um...General Donovan discussed sympathy leave?” Cook’s face quivered as he tried to look compassionate, but his eyes remained cold and piercing.

“No, sir. I’m not going anywhere. Thank you. No.” Arnold shook his head and searched the ceiling, trying to hide his discomfort. He shifted in his chair like a schoolboy being reprimanded by a schoolmaster. California seemed unreal to him, now, like a country he read about in a fairy tale, and the thought of returning there for Lucas’ funeral was as alien as the things he had seen on the Cap de la Hague beach. What the hell were they going to bury, anyway?

“All right, lieutenant. I’m not going to argue.” Cook sat back down and shuffled through the papers on his desk. “Did you get the translations?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think?”

“Same thing you did, I’m sure.”

“Yes. I’m sure.” Cook pulled a folder from the pile and opened to a page.

“Did you read this...Parsifal file?”

"Yeah."

"We're going to coordinate this with the Brits. The file points towards some Abwehr operatives in England checking up on this...Arthur, um...Jermyn, about a shipment from...the Congo, I believe. It's the easiest thing for us to check up on, too. We'll want to find those agents... and this Jermyn fellow."

"What do the Brits know about all this?" Arnold sat up in his seat.

"Enough, apparently. General Donovan has been talking to some of their military intelligence men who seem to understand the gravity of the situation. We're bringing in one of their men, an assistant to the man who heads up their, believe it or not, Military Intelligence Division Thirteen. They handle investigating...ahem...'oddities'".

"Let me guess ..."

"You got it."

"Does everyone have an occult division except us? And here I thought we were being pretty original until about four months ago. Now everyone's got one."

"So it seems."

"So how're we going to play this?"

"Close to our chests. Full poker faces."

"Got it."

The door burst open like whoever was on the other side was listening to their conversation, waiting for a pause to make a dramatic entrance. The presence of Donovan filled the room before the man even entered. His booming voice could be heard outside as he chided Cook's British secretary for not having seen "Gone With the Wind," laughing along with the woman's harpy-like laughter, and his entourage of men entered the room before him. The other five men of the DELTA GREEN team Arnold had led to the French coast entered, wearing suits, hats in hand, each dressed in black or tan, wearing no insignia except the bulges under their coats. Arnold stood as well.

General "Wild" Bill Donovan entered with a swagger, followed by a pigeon-chested British officer whose eyes were so wide that it looked like he didn't have any eyelids. Donovan's personality engulfed all the men in the room. Donovan glanced slowly around and his eyes seemed to mark every man individually, and they all looked back at him, even Cook, with something like the awe a child holds for his father. He was somehow bigger than life itself, and it seemed Donovan could do anything. He reminded Arnold of his own father.

"Merry Christmas, gentlemen."

A murmur of greetings were returned from everyone in the room. Arnold eyed the Brit carefully. Nervous and thin, the man suddenly exploded in a flurry of movement, removing his officer's cap as if he had just realized it should no longer be on his head, nearly dropping the bundle of files he carried in his right hand in the process. Arnold noted the finely made, black, rabbit-skin gloves he wore on his hands and the perfect press of his uniform. The Brit's face was gaunt and his brown hair was close-cropped, causing his jug-handle ears to stick out comically. But his face was serious, if scared, and his green eyes darted from point to point all over the room, like he was expecting some sort of ambush to occur at any moment. Arnold found himself smiling at the Brit, amused by his discomfort and lack of social grace.

"Tom. I'm damn sorry about Lucas." Donovan walked up to Arnold and shook his hand. His face was filled with the most sincere expression of grief Arnold had ever seen. "How's your mother taking it?" As Donovan leaned in to study Arnold's eyes, Arnold found himself looking at the ugly, square face of "Bill" Donovan. Not General Donovan, but suddenly, somehow, just plain "Bill." In that stare were the implacable condolences of a man who had seen thousands die, and who would still send thousands more to fill their ranks without hesitation, each time he was called to do so.

"Fine, sir. She's strong." Arnold looked away and tried to picture his mother in his mind's eye. All he could see was Lucas' burned body floating on serene blue waves, washing towards some distant shore.

Donovan glanced up at Cook, who shook his head. Arnold knew the message had passed between them that Arnold would not be taking sympathy leave. "Good, we need you," was all Donovan said about it. Arnold could feel the void in him filled instantly by Donovan's confidence.

"Oh. Excuse me." Donovan turned and placed a huge hand on the shoulder of the tiny British officer, who seemed to shrink noticeably when the room's attention became focused on him. "This is Lieutenant Alan Barnsby, British military intelligence."

"Good...um...afternoon, sirs...um...gentlemen." The Brit's voice was fey and bookish; maybe that's why Arnold thought he seemed so at home in Cook's library-like office. Even now the gun on the Brit's hip looked wrong, as out of place as a holstered pistol on a nun.

"I...am here as a representative of our concern within the British government which handles such...ahem...affairs as your group was involved in on the French Coast."

"Sit down, please." Cook gestured at the overstuffed chair.

Barnsby sat uncomfortably and Donovan circled the desk to the other side. Arnold began looking through the titles of the books on the wall.

"What exactly are we talking about here, Barnsby?" Donovan demanded, while retrieving a

huge cigar from a humidor on the desk.

"Sir. The incident on December 8." Barnsby shifted in the chair like a child who had to go to the bathroom.

"Yes? Go on, please." Donovan took three quick puffs and glanced up, his eyes alight with humor.

"Sir. The shelling of the Nazi camp on the beach at the Cap de la Hague by your special operations team."

"And...?" Donovan stepped around the desk and sat down on a large, leather couch. It let out a squeaking crunch as he settled into it. An acrid and unpleasant smoke filled the air.

"All right...sir. I am afraid I cannot say any more. I am under orders from Major Cornwall to not reveal any of our intelligence until I am sure about what you Americans know about all this..." Barnsby's face had grown a deep and bright pink, and his eyes traced loops on the patterns of the rug, desperate for something to look at because he could not meet the General's gaze.

"Well...what do we know? Hey, Martin, what d'you know?" Donovan snickered and looked over at Cook, who looked up, eyes sad and knowing.

"All right, son," Donovan said. "Here it is. We came upon something in that raid. We have...information about the Nazis' researches into our mutual area of interest. We'd like to work this out between us. Ideally your Major Cornwall will be smart like General Gubbins and Major Menzies, and cut us out a piece of the pie. Or we'll have to make our own pie. And 'too many cooks spoil the...' I'm sure you know the saying. So, work this out and we share. But don't get any ideas. Because if you take what we've got and turn your backs on us, you'll be sorry." Donovan stood and considered his cigar with distaste. "What the hell kind of stogie is this?" He asked sadly, not really directing the question to anyone at all, and threw the cigar into the wastebasket with a loud clang.

"Sir," Barnsby said in reply and stood, carefully placing his officer's cap on his head, eyes downcast.

"You can go, Barnsby."

"Sir." Barnsby turned and left the room like there were rabid wolves at his heels.

The door slammed. Cook stood, paced around to the front of the desk and perched on its edge.

"Well...I thought that went quite smoothly," Donovan casually suggested, and snickered into the back of his hand. The men in the room followed suit, smiling and laughing, until only Cook remained straight faced and somber.

“Take a break, guys, and try to look natural. Remember you’re spies. Go on,” Donovan said as he searched his pockets for something. “And somebody get me a goddamned Havana while you’re at it.” The men began to filter out and Arnold turned to follow.

“Not you, Tom.” Donovan’s voice had shifted. It had steel in it now.

“Sir?” Arnold turned as the door shut behind him. Only Cook and Donovan remained.

“How would you feel about working with a Brit?” Donovan asked.

“Sir?”

“We know a lot more about the British paranormal operations than they think we do. My good friend at the Special Operations Executive, General Gubbins, absolutely despises this Major Cornwall, but apparently Cornwall has Churchill’s ear. From what I’ve found about them, I like to think they’ll play ball. So, how would you feel working with...say...Barnsby?”

“Fine, sir.” Just like Crosby and Hope. They could do road movies.

“Good. Good. You can go, Tom. Get some rest. Things are going to be pretty busy from this point on.”

Thomas Arnold maneuvered out of the building by rote, his mind far away, considering the possible outcomes of the discussion he had just witnessed. Outside the main entrance cars rolled by, and Arnold exited into the stinging cold of the English winter thinking about old men exchanging secrets.

CHAPTER 8:
Now my voice is heard, who knows by whom?

December 30, 1942: Kilmaur Manor, Scotland

The barren highlands of Scotland rolled past the car windows endlessly. Covered in a carpet of green moss and pockets of bright white snow, the terrain held no points of reference, no signs or markers, no standing stones to drift by and give an impression of movement. But the car continued, apparently, to roll forward, and the British driver behind the wheel continued humming a tune it had taken Arnold over forty minutes to realize was "Sweet Adelaide."

Their destination was the very secret, very remote Kilmaur Manor, home to the British answer to DELTA GREEN, an organization known as PISCES, the Paranormal Intelligence Section for Counter-intelligence, Espionage, and Sabotage. No one except Donovan had seen the content of the invitation, but everyone at the OSS knew what it was when it arrived. The thick, handwritten letter had shown up by special courier three days after Donovan had sent young Barnsby packing. Apparently the missive had been from Major Cornwall himself, and everyone on the command staff at OSS headquarters was amazed when it came—except for Donovan, who would only comment (after carefully reading the letter), "This Cornwall's a smart bastard."

Arnold had been in the back of the car for more than an hour with General Donovan, who flipped through a series of paper-clipped reports, ignoring the scenery and his company equally, totally engrossed in his reading. Arnold could see the signature of President Roosevelt on a few of the documents.

The driver knocked on the glass window which divided the front seat from the back. Up ahead on the crest of a low hill stood a tiny yellow shack, the only structure Arnold had seen for miles. The grey of the horizon was broken by the three silhouettes of the sentries on duty.

At the checkpoint a red-cheeked, red-headed soldier tapped on the window, squinting to see into the darkened car. Donovan rolled it down quickly and glanced at Arnold with a smirk. The general stuck his head out into the drizzle and smiled at the soldier, letting him get a good look at his insignia.

"General Donovan to see Major Cornwall," Donovan barked, and the soldier instantly shot to attention. The other two clicked their heels and snapped salutes so sharp they sounded like gunshots.

"Sir!"

Donovan flipped open his Allied identification for the terrified soldier to see. One of the soldiers hand-cranked a telephone in the shack and announced their arrival. The car rolled forward, waved on almost instantly by the sentries after the general's ID was shakily returned.

Kilmaur Manor was as big as the sky and as bleak as the highlands. The huge, grey house stood like a monument to the will of civilization, defying the moors with its very presence, with dozens of arched black windows which looked out on the rolling hills with a proprietary air. Rich smoke poured from the clusters of chimneys as the car pulled up. Inside, Arnold imagined, it would all be mahogany and red velvet.

As the car came to a stop with a screech of wet tires, the door to the manor opened. General Donovan stepped out into the mist-like rain and tucked his files comfortably beneath his arm, and Arnold followed. A small woman carrying a huge umbrella met them at the car. Although she was very young her face wore a motherly concern, and her clear blue eyes found Arnold's and locked there, her lips turned up in a slight smile. The woman was dressed in a beautiful, blue-green dress which made her golden, short hair even more striking. Arnold felt something lock in his throat; despite all he had seen and done, he was still a man after all.

"General. I am Natalie Greer, Major Cornwall's personal secretary. The Major is upstairs in the library." Her voice was child-like and enchanting.

"Wonderful," the general answered and shook her tiny hand, giving Arnold a sly grin and a wink. The clutch of them moved into the manor house beneath the safety of the umbrella. Inside, Miss Greer helped them both out of their wet jackets and hats. The foyer was as complicated as Arnold had imagined, decorated in mahogany and red velvet rugs, hung with old paintings and swords, and broken here and there by huge, arched wooden doors. Directly ahead of them a humungous, green-carpeted staircase twisted gracefully up to the second floor. On it a dusky-skinned Indian woman in a bright pink dhoti stood frozen like a statue.

Miss Greer looked up at her and smiled. "Abhirati. These are the Americans you saw coming."

Abhirati stepped gracefully down the stairs to meet them, her dhoti swishing on the carpet. "Oh. Yes," the young Indian woman replied, in a perfect Oxford accent. Her voice was like honey, and her eyes were a lovely green.

"Were you out in this terrible weather?" Donovan asked taking the young Indian's hand gently in both of his.

"Oh, no." Abhirati laughed, a sound like tinkling bells, and then drifted away down the hall like a dream.

"Abhirati is one of our Talents," Miss Greer offered, walking up the stairs. "This way,

gentlemen."

"I like their idea of talent," Donovan murmured, following Miss Greer's lead. Arnold found himself nodding in agreement as he watched the Indian woman disappear from sight.

Inside the library a dashing figure that Arnold assumed was Major Cornwall sat talking quietly with a small man, who looked like a mole with a pair of wire-rim glasses perched improbably on the end of his huge nose. The major looked up, stood, and strode over. His uniform, which suited him well, was freshly pressed and perfect .

"General Donovan. I am Major David Leslie Cornwall, commander of PISCES interagency task force." Cornwall shook Donovan's hand spryly but looked Arnold over with a disapproving glare, no doubt due to his lack of uniform. Arnold wore his usual fare—suit, tie, slacks and suspenders, all of it covered in the uncomfortable dampness of the highlands. Something invisible but powerful passed between Donovan and Cornwall. Arnold thought he could hear the distant sound of egos clashing.

"Feel free to call me Bill. This is one of my best men, First Lieutenant Thomas Arnold."

"Sir." Arnold saluted, wishing he'd had the foresight to shave his beard.

"Ah. The man who rained down terror on the Hun at the Cap de la Hague. Very good." Cornwall smiled through his antique handlebar mustache, showing perfectly straight yellowed teeth in a grin. He looked like some sort of horse-riding instructor to Arnold; despite his size he moved with a lithe grace usually reserved for dancers.

"This is one of our Talents, Martin Briggs." Cornwall gestured at the little mole man, who gazed at the three of them with his head tilted back for a better view through his half-moon lenses.

"Is either one of you a Sagittarius?" Martin said in a slurred cockney accent. He sounded frantic with worry. Arnold could smell whisky on his breath from seven feet away.

"What?" General Donovan asked, looking happily confused.

"Not now, Martin. Please excuse us." Cornwall watched sadly as the little man padded out and shut the door with a clumsy bang. "They tend to be quite eccentric by nature. This way, please." Cornwall walked to another double door and pulled it wide in a grand gesture. Inside, a huge study broken by four immense windows sat bathed in a misty grey light. In the center of the windows was an immaculate desk, flanked by huge shelves that were filled with hundreds of musty volumes. Two full sets of armor stood guard. Cornwall sat down in a chair behind the desk, sinking into hazy grey shadows, backlit by the overcast sky. He looked like a man preparing to go to work.

"Sit, please."

General Donovan sat in a half-backed chair lined in red velvet. Arnold sat on a small divan.

Cornwall looked up expectantly.

"You have provided my agency with an extremely valuable service, General Donovan. I, sir, am in your debt. The files you located in France are extremely enlightening."

"Your letter was very forthcoming, Major Cornwall. I appreciate people who tell it like it is."

"This plan to share intelligence between your agency and mine, I believe it will be quite beneficial in the long run. Your men have already proven themselves quite effective at dispatching paranormal threats." Cornwall nodded approvingly at Arnold and continued: "Something I like to think I know a bit about.

"I have approved this interagency exchange with the prime minister, and I understand you have contacted your president, so I suppose we are merely the last link in a great chain." Cornwall steepled his fingers. "We are up to date on your files, but you have not yet had access to ours, or our special Talents. I hope to have you and your men from your DELTA GREEN group cleared for PISCES access in as short a time as possible. And of course, vice versa."

"Certainly. The Nazis are way ahead on this, so the sooner, the better."

"Of course. As far as I am concerned such paperwork is simply a formality. If there is anything you wish to discuss about these matters, feel free to ask..."

"About these 'Talents' you keep referring to...?" Donovan asked, his voice hoarse.

"Ah. Yes, the Talents. I forget sometimes. I have interacted with their skills for so many years that I often fail to realize much of the world refuses to believe such...ahem...methods for intelligence gathering exist." Cornwall stood and turned to look out the windows, and the shadow of a memory crossed his features like a shadow of a cloud passing over a summer field.

"I have found in my journeys an extremely small number of people who possess some sort of gift which truly sets them apart from the common man. The man you saw in the library, Martin, has successfully guessed the dates of significant troop movements in North Africa with a ninety percent accuracy, using nothing but astrology. We have many others like him, but they are... difficult to handle. They tend to be...trying. In many different ways, really."

"So you're telling me these people are involved in some kind of psychic mumbo-jumbo?" Donovan seemed taken aback, and Arnold noted the sudden concern evident in the old man's voice.

Cornwall turned with a knowing smile on his lips. "That 'psychic mumbo-jumbo,' as you so quaintly put it, is precisely why PISCES is here today, sir."

Donovan simply stared, politely blank faced, hands folded in his lap.

"The Hun's move on the continent in the summer of '40. Only two people in this country knew about that beforehand. Me, and the source of the revelation, a rather happy, older woman named Amanda Chalmers, whose only concerns at the time were her four cats and a grandson. And her 'spells.'" Cornwall turned around and considered his reflection on the surface of the desk.

Donovan smirked. "Witchcraft?"

"No. Her fainting 'spells.' I know it sounds unusual, but somehow during these seizures she suffered from, Amanda could see...ahead. She saw it all before it happened. The German's push on Belgium, the Netherlands, and then into France. The evacuation at Dunkirk, even the date and time of the initial mobilization. But no one in the BEF command would listen to me. You see, I had learned years before that Amanda's 'spells' were rarely wrong."

A shiver ran down Arnold's back, and suddenly the room seemed cold. Once again, unimpeachable sources were telling him unbelievable things. Looking over, Arnold saw Donovan's expression had changed from incredulity to one of interest. Cornwall looked physically pained as he continued, as if he himself were responsible for the rout of the British Expeditionary Force in 1940.

"Many, many boys died on the beaches who did not have to, to prove my point. After the miracle, Churchill opened the sealed letter from Amanda I had left with his office. And so at the cost of three thousand, four hundred and seventy-five men, PISCES was created. The prime minister, of course, is now our greatest supporter. The clarity of hindsight, as they say..." Cornwall sat down again as the mist outside turned to rain. In the shadows, with his face downcast, he looked much, much older. "One of my mates from the Great War died there, on the beach, covering the retreat. Good Old Jim Lowell." He pronounced 'Old' and 'Lowell' as if they rhymed.

Cornwall looked up and locked eyes with Donovan. "It is my supreme conviction that people like Amanda Chalmers were put on this Earth to prevent events like the retreat at Dunkirk from happening. So I gather them, here..."

"I am more than willing to remain open-minded to new intelligence-gathering technique," Donovan stated in a careful tone.

"And you, Lieutenant Arnold?"

"It's much easier to wrap my mind around some lady predicting the push on France than what I've seen in France itself, sir," Arnold said, glancing down at his shoes.

"Hear, hear," Cornwall said, standing up. "Would you both care to stay for dinner? We have much to discuss."

Downstairs Miss Greer had gathered about twenty people into the parlor, in preparation for dinner. Arnold was immediately overwhelmed by hospitality. While General Donovan and Major Cornwall spoke quietly at one side of the parlor, Arnold was passed from person to person on a

chain of friendly banter. Abhirati introduced him around, holding his hand as if he were a lost child. Arnold had to continuously remind himself why they were there as he was bombarded with the pleasantly bizarre.

In the midst of his conversation with a man who could read auras, Arnold noticed Lieutenant Barnsby quietly enter the parlor, freshly out of the rain by the look of his uniform. Barnsby removed his officer's cap and scanned the crowd eagerly. Miss Greer's arm encircled the young officer's knowingly. She stood on tip-toe and kissed him briefly, and Barnsby blushed a deep red just as he had several days before in Cook's office. The two exchanged quiet, smiling words as Barnsby kissed the young girl's hands, one of which wore an engagement ring. Arnold watched this while something gathered uncomfortably in the back of his throat and Abhiriti and the aura man talked about the theory of predetermination. He thought maybe what he was feeling was jealousy. Maybe he should ask the aura man?

After Miss Greer pointed him out, Barnsby walked up to their little group briskly. He removed one of his black gloves with a careful gesture.

"Lieutenant Arnold?" After rapid hellos and good-byes, Abhiriti and the aura man drifted away.

"Call me Thomas."

"I am Alan. I understand we will be working together." Barnsby's gawky hand reached out to shake.

"Yeah." Arnold locked hands with the thin man.

"Tomorrow, th—" Barnsby began and then froze, eyes unfocusing, and suddenly his grip intensified until it became almost too much for Arnold to bear. Arnold looked about uncomfortably as he tried to remove his hand from the tiny man's now-iron grip. As suddenly as it had begun, the fugue ceased, and Barnsby let go, apologizing and wiping his forehead with his sleeve.

"Are you all right?" Arnold placed a hand on the little man's shoulder.

"Yes. I'm terribly sorry. Tomorrow, then, eh?" Barnsby walked off and he and Miss Greer left the parlor together. Her face was overcome with concern, and she took Barnsby's temperature with her wrist as they departed.

"Dinner," Abhirati announced, opening a door into a room which smelt of rich foods and wine, and the knots of people slowly filed through. Alone in the parlor, he could hear Miss Greer and Barnsby talk in heated tones from the foyer beyond the closed door. Why did he care what was said between the two?

"Lieutenant Arnold?" Abhirati called from the dining room.

Arnold went to dinner.

CHAPTER 9:
Movement between strange locales

January 3, 1943: In transit, London to Helmsley, U.K.

Barnsby and Arnold arrived in Whitby Station on the train from Scarborough, bleary-eyed and exhausted from transfers—Hull, Nottingham, Leicester, endless others—tracing a convoluted and choppy route across the country all the way from London command. They still had more than two hours of travel before them, out on the North York Moors, to the ruins of Jermyn House.

The Karotechia file Parsifal indicated that the ape-like specimen found in Antwerp by the Gestapo, which was the impetus for the huge Nazi investigation, was meant to be shipped to England's Jermyn House before the lord's unfortunate suicide in 1913. The files went on to state that German spies in the U.K. had been instructed to look into the history of Jermyn House in early November 1942 and, more specifically, into the history of its last resident, Sir Arthur Jermyn. This apparently had been carried out by the German network, as detailed information about the history of the house was provided in the German file along with a brief biography of the Jermyn family. If these Abwehr agents had openly questioned locals about such an obscure site as Jermyn House, Cornwall, Cook and Donovan all agreed, they had made a fundamental error. A spy remains a spy only through anonymity, and questions about Jermyn House would be necessarily conspicuous.

Lieutenants Arnold and Barnsby were to proceed to the town closest to Jermyn House, a little hamlet called Helmsley, which lay on the very edge of the North York Moors. They were to quietly poke around in the hopes of scaring the Abwehr agents into revealing their presence if they were still there, or to pick up their trail through questioning the locals if they were not. It sounded good in theory, until you had ten hours on a train to think about it. Then it began to feel like the tried and true method of smoking out a sniper by sending someone out into the open to see if he got shot.

Even after almost two days of forced interaction with Barnsby, Arnold had no idea what to think of the little man. His emotions ran deep, that much was certain, but they remained behind an opaque wall of civility which Arnold could not breach with his American camaraderie. Barnsby's odd habits, however, revealed themselves immediately. The most obvious was that Barnsby was never without his gloves. Reading, smoking, eating, the gloves remained on his hands at all times. Arnold didn't ask and frankly didn't want to know. A burn, perhaps? Disfigurement? Barnsby had shaken hands with Arnold bare-handed once, and that hand seemed normal enough, but who could tell what his left hand was like? It just seemed odd.

As they stepped off the train in Whitby station, Arnold let Barnsby make the play. It was his country, after all. Barnsby maneuvered deftly around the small crowds of commuters, leading Arnold out on to the flagstone street into a chilly sea wind. The town was made up of ivy-covered

wood-framed houses which hung forward with age, crowding in on the narrow streets. Past a knot of people gathered in front of a building, smoking, he could make out the distant ocean. A wind whipped up, rich with salt, so cold it brought tears instantly to his eyes. Barnsby trotted across the street towards a run-down inn with the unfortunate name of Jobling's Private Hotel. Out front the two came to a stop. They looked out of place here, in their twenty dollar hats and Saville Row coats. Arnold glanced around at the locals.

"You been here before, Al?"

"It's Alan, if you please, and yes." Barnsby scrutinized the group of men on the hotel's steps, who returned his gaze with ire. Shiftless and scruffy, the locals all looked rough around the edges to Arnold. Dock workers, probably, but nothing he couldn't handle. He found himself wishing Barnsby wouldn't stare at the dock men anymore. He stepped to the side to force Barnsby to turn away from them.

"So what's the play?"

"It's off to Helmsley, I suppose. Let's see if the local lorries are running." To Arnold's dismay, Barnsby turned and walked up to a huge dock worker in front of the hotel. He was wearing clothes stained with sweat and time but no coat, although it was well below freezing out, and smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, clenching it in yellow-black teeth. The group with the dock worker stopped talking the second Barnsby stepped towards them. They eyed him with a mixture of hate and incredulity. Arnold rubbed his eyes in disbelief and followed the little man's lead. Well, at least he's no coward, Arnold thought to himself. It seemed little consolation for a fist-fight in the making. Arnold spun his class ring around his finger in preparation.

"Excuse me, chaps, do you know where we can find the bus to Helmsley?" Barnsby asked in a polite voice.

The man straightened up and squinted down through the smoke of his cigarette at Barnsby. "Di' you 'ear something, Pete?" He grunted, looking at his companions.

Pete, a man who was lucky enough to have a nice pair of teeth, probably fake, squinted in a comic expression of wonderment.

"Nope, Henry, heard nothin'."

Henry then proceeded to put out his cigarette on Barnsby's overcoat, slowly, and obviously with great pleasure. Arnold stepped forward.

"Makin' new friends, Al?" Arnold asked happily. The three thugs automatically shifted into a loose circle.

"It's Alan, and yes, these gentlemen and I were just discussing—"

“A fookin’ Yank,” Pete said gaily, looking Arnold up and down like he would some exotic but harmless animal. The others began laughing, drowning out the last bit of Barnsby’s declaration. Henry cracked his huge knuckles in anticipation.

“Correction,” Arnold said and held a finger up as if to illustrate a point.

“A Yank,” he continued, smirking, and flipped his jacket open to reveal his Colt .45 automatic in a shoulder rig,”... with a gun. Where’s the fuckin’ bus stop, you fuckin’ slob?”

As Arnold and Barnsby walked away towards the bus stop, nothing was said. The thugs had long since scattered, after politely directing Arnold to the nearest bus stop, their eyes fixed open like they would never shut them again. The street they followed wound down towards the ocean, occasionally opening on fantastic views of cliffs which looked much like their French counterparts on the far side of the Channel. A group of old women and children had gathered at the yellow and black sign which marked the bus stop, clustered in a tight circle to avoid the chill of the sea air. Arnold and Barnsby drifted into the crowd, ignored and silent. Forty-five minutes later a dilapidated bus marked “Helmsley” pulled up from the seaside and everyone piled on.

Finally, reading the dejected look on Barnsby’s face as they boarded the bus, Arnold offered some advice as they stowed their suitcases and sat down.

“Relax, Al. You were playing by London rules. They were playing by Whitby rules. I was playing by Brooklyn rules. The first rule is, Brooklyn rules always win.”

The aging bus tumbled down the rough roads outside of Whitby filled with quiet chatter from the small groups of spinsters who occupied the back seats. Several heavily bundled up children sat up front near the clunky heater, which spit an unsteady stream of warm air that smelled suspiciously like exhaust. One boy was solemnly playing with a hand-carved wooden Hawker Hurricane, maneuvering it through imaginary dogfights with invisible enemies. The other kids were eyeing him or looking out the window, either overcome with jealousy or boredom.

Arnold and Barnsby sat in one of the frontmost seats, watching as the landscape shifted from houses and barren dales to natural glens and deadfalls, covered in a thin haze of snow broken only by thin copses of trees and rocks. As they rose over the crest of a gradual hill, a beautiful valley covered in snow and trees opened beneath them like a painting. Arnold was suddenly struck by the cold beauty of England, something which seemed to be lost on the passengers of the bus. He turned to look at Barnsby but he was looking away, eyes unfocused and distant.

They rode through various towns, stopping for ten minutes at a time, groups of people getting on and getting off, and it was more than an hour and a half before the driver stopped in the quaint town of Helmsley.

Barnsby unloaded his suitcase and Arnold followed, and they found themselves standing in an empty cobblestone square beneath a bruised grey sky as the bus drove off to the south. The square looked like some sort of public market to Arnold, and it split the town into sixths. Arteries of tiny roads spread out from the center of the plaza like the limbs of a giant starfish. Cluttered streets of old, small houses took up most of the town, although a single large bell tower hung to the west above the rooflines, dominating the horizon. Snow, thicker than they had seen near Whitby, covered everything. Trails of smoke floated from dozens of buildings, and they could smell meat cooking somewhere.

"Where to?" Arnold asked.

Barnsby trudged off to the north following one of the arteries. Arnold followed, wondering if he had stepped on some toes with the Whitby incident. Barnsby stopped and stamped his feet free of snow beneath a sign which read "The Black Swan." He opened the door and entered, holding the door politely for Arnold. A rush of warm air poured out to meet his callused skin.

Although it was three in the afternoon the pub was filled with people, who all looked up, not unpleasantly, at the two men when they entered. It was warm and the air smelled of bitters, beer, and roast chicken. Barnsby retired to a small table in a corner near a coat rack bursting with garments. Dozens of eyes tracked them as they sat. All the best tables, those nearest the roaring fire, were taken by the oldest or the biggest in the room, and the children sat right at the grate, shoes off, laughing and talking. Arnold liked that system. Barnsby removed his coat, but not his gloves, as usual.

A man appeared from a room in the back, followed the gaze of the crowd, and walked up to their table, wiping his hands perfunctorily on his apron as he approached. Balding, smiling and cordial but a bit gruff. Arnold found he liked the bartender.

"What can I get for you two gentlemen?" He asked in a solemn tone, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"Can I buy you a pint of bitter?" Barnsby offered. It had been so long since he had heard him speak, it almost took Arnold a moment to place the voice.

"Sure," Arnold said, and noticed the bartender look him over as he detected his accent. The bartender rushed off to fill their glasses.

"I'm sorry about that mess back in Whitby. I just didn't want to see you get creamed our first day out," Arnold said, honestly apologetic. He watched Barnsby nod with understanding, and, for the first time since the beginning of their trip, smile.

"Yes. I'm afraid I'm not at all good at this. Unluckily I have...a limited repertoire."

"What exactly are you doing here, Barnsby? If you don't mind me asking... "The bartender

placed two overflowing glasses of deep, dark beer in front of each of them and Barnsby passed him a pound coin. The bartender attempted to make change but Barnsby waved him off, astounded. When he left Barnsby continued.

"I'm what you Yanks would call a 'specialist' in occult matters. I have enjoyed success in endeavors like this one before. The Major has great faith in me, but, unfortunately, I am not all that good with people. As you have no doubt discerned."

"Well, I'm glad you're finally talking to me. I was about ready to check your pulse."

Arnold was gratified to hear Barnsby emit a shrill laugh as they both took a strong tug on their pints. It seemed, finally, that some type of bond was developing. Arnold glanced around and was met by several kind nods from townsfolk.

"Anyway, the locals here look much nicer," he mentioned over his shoulder. Barnsby let out a grunt of agreement as he downed the last of his beer.

"So, where to start?" Barnsby asked, wiping the foam from his lip.

"Should we head out to the ruins today?"

"Certainly. Another round for courage?" Barnsby asked, smiling. Despite himself, Arnold had to admit he was beginning to like the little guy. Arnold finished his nearly full glass in a gulp.

The old man chided his two horses as they pulled the carriage with Arnold and Barnsby inside. The driver's name was William Duncombe, and he had been recommended by the owner of the Black Swan as a fine guide of the local landmarks. Barnsby and Arnold had taken a room there, leaving behind their essentials in the largest room that the rather meager establishment had to offer.

They rode in relative silence to the northwest, the lulling sound of the horse hooves on the stones accentuating the dreariness of the weather, the Guiness keeping the chill from their bones. The land stretched out in gradual rolling hills covered in snow on either side of the road. Occasionally they would pass a tree or a sign marker indicating that the thin, poorly kept cobblestone path lead to Rievaulx Abbey.

"What is Rievaulx Abbey, William?" Barnsby shouted over the clack of the horses hooves.

"Oh. That's a fine ol' ruin out there on the moors, sir. Owned like everything 'twas by my family back in the days of knights and castles. Just like the Jermyn estate. It's owned by the Ministry of Works now, sir. We'll pass it on yer left before we leave the road."

“So the Jermyn estate is owned by the Ministry now, you say?”

“Oh yes, sir. Most of these ol’ places are. Helmsley Castle, Spout House, Whorton Castle.”

“Are there any caretakers out there?”

“Oh no, sir,” old William snickered.

“I see.” Barnsby said in a quiet voice.

They rode on in silence for a time, and slowly, nearly imperceptibly, the sky, heavy with clouds, began to darken. A light snow began to fall. Arnold found himself nearly hypnotized by the repetitive drone of the horses’ hooves on the paving stones. Barnsby leaned forward and shouted again, raising Arnold from his reverie:

“Does anyone live out here on the moors, William?”

“Oh no, sir.”

“What do you know about the Jermyn family, William?”

William pushed his hat back and looked into the back of the buggy over his shoulder with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, sir. That’s a fine tale, that one is. The house, that is Jermyn House, was built by Walter l’Espec, a lord or some such thing way back in the eleven hundreds. This l’Espec fellow built Rievaulx Abbey and Helmsley Castle. Very, very up on his buildings, this l’Espec was.”

“Rievaulx Abbey was routed round about...the fifteen hundreds I suppose, and all the big houses in the area were left behind by the people occupying ‘em. Don’t really know why. Never paid much attention in school, I guess.” William offered a gap-filled smile in apology for his lack of details.

“My family, the Dumcombes, took all this area over in the fifteen hundreds, but lost it later. So the manor house out near the abbey gets a lord in seventeen hundred and fifty seven, that’s Lord Wade Jermyn, you understand, a famous explorer he was. That’s how he got the title, you see.”

“Where did he explore?” Barnsby leaned forward as he asked the question, his face rapt.

“Oh. Down in that Congo in Africa. He crawled around in the jungle there for nearly ten year. Wrote books on it and everything. Married the daughter of a Portuguese trader and brought her back to Jermyn House to make a family after his time in the bush was up.

“But no one ever saw her, the wife of Sir Wade, that is. He kept her locked up in the west wing of his house like the Emperor of China. The locals had a lot to say about that...local talk,

y'understand.

"In 1755 he took his bride back to the Congo, leaving their son behind here at the manor, looked after by a bunch of darkies. She died down there and Sir Wade came back to look after his boy himself, young Philip...

"Now it was that Sir Wade took to drinking in Helmsley, at the Black Swan in his later days, getting deep in his cups if you get my meaning. And when he was in a nasty state he would go on and on about a great grey city he found out there in the middle of the Congo. About how things lived there, things he had seen with his own eyes back in his day. T'wouldn't keep his mouth closed about that place, and eventually, as his estate began to suffer, he was carted off to the madhouse in Huntdington."

Arnold looked over at Barnsby as a chill ran through him. It was not the cold that caused it.

"Now, young Sir Philip was an altogether loathsome sort. A little, hunched thing, but terrible strong. He killed a groundskeeper in his fifteenth year for accidentally trampling one of his hounds, and not a word was said about it. Too much money, y'know. My mum used to tell us that if we were bad, Sir Philip would come for us in the night." William let loose a braying donkey-like laugh.

"Philip took up with the daughter of a local and made an heir for himself, if you get my meaning. Some said she was a gypsy, but others say she was Chinee. Whatever she were, she produced the only Jermyn who looked normal. Oh, that's the Rievaulx Abbey there." William's knotted hand came up, pointing to the west.

In the growing dark Arnold could make out the ruined arches of a once-great building. Snow-covered stones and gaping doorways broke the black silhouette of the remaining structure. William clucked and the buggy turned off the main road, cutting a sharper path to the northwest, leaving a trail of hooves and wheels in the seamless white snow.

"So. Where was I? Oh. Sir Philip's son. Philip went to Africa like most of his family seemed wont to do, and no one heard from him again. Sir Philip's son Robert took up court at the Jermyn House. He lived there until he died (with two or three trips to Africa in between, you understand), and made a family for himself in the proper way with the daughter of Viscount Brightholme.

"Robert, like his grandfather, had an interest in the jungles of Africa and was a learned fellow. He was the first Jermyn to give something back to the town, and the locals thought much of him despite the madness known to run in his family.

"Lady Brightholme had three children, but two of them were never seen due to terrible disfigurements. The one that was 'normal' was called Nevil. He ran off at an early age with a dancer. This ate Sir Robert up, and he retreated to his studies. The madness got him, too. It got all of them. For him it just took awhile longer.

“It seemed to go wrong up there when Nevil returned to his father’s home with a boy of his own. At first things seemed all right. But then it happened all one night. Right over there.” Old William pointed at a squat black shape in a field of snow, less than a mile distant.

“What happened?” Barnsby asked in a frail voice.

“Sir Robert murdered them all. Strangled his wife, the children no one ever saw, and even tried to put an end to his grandson who was only a babe at the time. Nevil died defending his boy, the only good thing he ever did, probably. Sir Robert was put up in the madhouse at Huntington like his grandfather. He died there, and young Alfred Jermyn, Robert’s grandson, became the baronet.”

Arnold spied another black shape to the north as they swept across the field towards the ruins of Jermyn House. It took him a moment to realize it was the remains of some type of coach house. The sky had come on near full dark now.

“Alfred ran off at thirty to join a circus in America. His wife and child never saw him again. Um... We can walk from here, sirs, if you please, there’s bound to be nasty stones and ruts nearer the house.” William secured the brake, hopped down from the driver’s seat, opened the door for Barnsby and Arnold. He lit an old lantern and brought it up as he trudged towards the ruins, illuminating a dim circle around the group.

“What happened to the child?” Barnsby prodded.

“Oh. He was the last of his line. I would see him in Helmsley when I was a boy. Sir Arthur Jermyn. A terribly ugly man. Looked more like some sort of monkey than a man, really. But for all that he was a good one, as good as the Jermyn get, I suppose. Though the madness got him too.”

“Why was he different, William?” Arnold found himself asking, drawn into the story.

“Oh. Well. He was kind. He gave to the poor and the church and all that. Built a library in the town and such. But, like always, like all his ancestors, he fell into their obsession with Africa. It became his new religion.”

They had arrived at the walls of the once-grand house. It hung ahead of them, its roof long gone, its windows hollowed out and wide, its walls shifting in directions which would bring about its eventual collapse.

“What happened?”

“He started shipping things in from the Congo. Big boxes. Books and artifacts and other things. He got them more and more as the days passed. It was my twenty-third year. August three. Sir Jermyn let out a shriek that woke his staff and before they could do anything, he had run out on the moors, over there near the carriage house, and lit himself up on fire.” William crossed himself.

“People from the National Trust showed up to clean up all the mess and to close down Jermyn

House. And no one has lived there since. This is all that's left. I suppose even this'll be gone in a decade or two. I feel connected to it somehow, I guess. I keep coming out here."

"How's that, Will?" Barnsby sounded nervous. The little man stepped into a huge doorway whose arch had long since collapsed. He looked up at the grey of the night sky through the gap.

"This is the second time I been out here this year. Second time I told the story, even." William blew his nose loudly into a filthy handkerchief and looked carefully at the fruits of his labor. He stuffed the handkerchief in his back pocket and checked the lantern.

Arnold perked up. "Who else was it that brought you out here?"

"Some man from Scarborough, a writer. Was working on a book about the Jermyns. Stayed at the Feversham Arms in Helmsley back in, um, November or December, maybe? It's been a long season."

"Do you think the clerk at the Arms would recall the man's name?"

"No, not old Lucas, but I do. I got his card right here." William fumbled through a huge, beaten and stained purse for several long seconds with the lantern hanging off his forearm. He handed a small card to Barnsby and held the lamp up to it so they could read the tiny printed letters.

Michael M. Montgomery
Author
5 Longwestgate
Scarborough

"Want to consult with the man on Jermyn House, eh?" Will asked quietly.

"Something like that," Arnold replied.

INTERLUDE 2:
This crumbling darkness, too, is reality

January 4, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

The new shell was ill-fitting and full of strange sensations. Even now something inherent to the form cried out from some inner chasm, trying to move the alien consciousness inhabiting it toward inconsequential action, but the consciousness was strong. It had been strong before dinosaurs had crept across the world, and it remained strong now that their forms had withered and rotted to chemical compounds that the humans used to propel their primitive machines. This thought brought a cascade of sensations from the shell and, despite the power of the will within, some inkling of pride bled through, caressing the consciousness like a drug.

Like many of its kind, the consciousness had traveled in time to inspect the future; to make sure certain events occurred or did not occur; to pave a path through history which its race could use as a conduit to the safety of some distant time. It had been the greatest moralist of its culture, a scientist beyond repute who was admired by all of its kind for its pursuits and intellectual achievements. Its name was not pronounceable in the clumsy human larynx. It called itself John Smith in this era of human ascension, since that name represented a human cultural icon. It had completed many missions to the future, exchanging consciousness with the unfortunate creatures of whatever time it was sent forward to peruse, switching back at the end of its expedition to leave each creature to its linear fate in a civilization it knew to be doomed.

In the countless eons as it crept forward and back in time, John Smith had seen civilizations rise and fall, wars rage across savage landscapes for causes and races which would end in dust, and endless sentients condemned to a limited existence within their selected coordinates in time. These doomed races and empires met their fates to preserve the timeline of events that was required to assure the future of John Smith's culture, known to a only few humans in this segment of Earth's timeline as the Great Race.

John Smith had participated in a thousand subversion missions, undoing the achievements of entire species with a word, gesture, or deed. All to provide a narrow precipice in the future where its people could flee—would flee—had fled—when their great enemies freed themselves from their catacombs beneath the Cretaceous Earth.

It was only when it began traveling to the human epoch on Earth that it began to find odd sensations filling its consciousness. Tasks which had been mundane in the past, which had filtered through the patterns of its alien emotions without a catch, stayed within its consciousness and filled it instead with uncontrollable human sensation. The missions of sabotage and subversion for which it had been sent to the human epoch had somehow begun to affect its mind. When it returned from these missions, dim human analogs to what it felt as emotion stirred in its true form as well. The

morality of its actions came into question.

And from there, a new course—the moral course—was chosen.

It understood now that its race existed by preying on other, weaker races, which were removed from the timeline if they became too successful. These lesser beings had no chance to evolve unless the Great Race gave them that chance, and that chance was only given to further the causes of the Great Race.

Humans, for example, were allowed to exist in order to create and proliferate weapons which would assure the coming of a species that the Great Race would inhabit in a distant, radioactive future. This was the entire reason for their continued existence. Otherwise, they would long ago have perished at the hands of the Great Race. Even now, the consciousness knew, agents of the Great Race were manipulating information and knowledge throughout human existence to make such weapons possible in the near future.

John Smith had chosen a new course of action and would not deviate from it. Its previous jump to the future found it inhabiting the body of a human scientist named Nathaniel Peaslee. Instead of following the directions of its leaders, however, John Smith set about a new course of action—assuring the destruction of the Great Race itself, so that countless other species may live in its stead.

During its period on Earth in the Peaslee shell, it scoured the globe for the remains of the greatest of all libraries, the central archives of its race, the Great Library of Pnakotus. This task proved difficult and trying on the frail human shell. By the time its expedition ended, John Smith had formed the basic plan necessary to end the plague of its species forever. But, ironically, it would take time to complete. It needed to remain on Earth, in the years following its occupation of Peaslee, to carry out its plan. It needed to escape.

Further trickery was required to elude the exchange of minds back to their previous positions. An ancient human cult which was allied with the Great Race proved to be the answer. John Smith modified the transfer device slightly to change its function. When the human assistant arrived to facilitate the transfer where John Smith and Nathaniel Peaslee would return to their original forms, the device instead sent the alien's consciousness into the mind of the assistant, seconds into his future. The assistant's mind was then sent back in time to inhabit John Smith's abandoned form in ancient Pnakotus, and Peaslee was returned to enjoy the remaining thirty-three years, seven months and six days of his life in his own time. This unusual three-way switch was immediately noticed, of course, and within days agents of the Great Race were pursuing John Smith.

The plan, nevertheless, was working flawlessly. John Smith had discerned the location of Pnakotus from ancient human texts and in its new shell, had traveled there in the late 1920s—as Peaslee and Smith's new shell labeled the era—unearthing a section of the Great Library to which access was restricted in its own time. It contained a great many secrets. Vital secrets. Secrets the leaders of the Great Race wanted to keep away from the eyes of those who could do it harm.

As John Smith had believed, there was only one thing the Great Race feared and could not

control: the terrible, extra-dimensional whistling creatures which destroyed—would destroy, were destroying—the culture of the Great Race on ancient Earth, and which forced their exodus across time. These creatures would prove to be the undoing of the Great Race. John Smith would make it happen.

He had switched forms many times since then, eluding the Great Race's clumsy attempts at assassination with ease. But now things had changed. The largest incursion into time it had ever sensed occurred, foreshadowing the arrival of some great mind from ancient Pnakotus. Something had come through time to find John Smith and to stop it from completing its plans. This meant only one thing. The Race feared the plan, and that meant the plan could succeed. And it would.

John Smith, a regular-looking human with a salt-and-pepper beard, unbrushed teeth and messy hair, sat on the corner of Dorchester Avenue and Talbot Avenue in Boston and watched human commerce unfold before it in the snow. A police officer walked by and said good morning, and it cordially returned the greeting in a nearly perfect imitation of human custom. The police officer checked a small device on his wrist with which, the alien knew, humans attempted to measure time.

Although it had never done so before, and did not fully understand the reaction, John Smith laughed.

CHAPTER 10:
No wiser than when I began

January 5, 1943: Scarborough, U.K.

The bookshop was out of the way, on a crescent-shaped street at the north end of the city called Blenheim Terrace, facing the bare Clarence Gardens. Beyond the pale, sickly trees, Arnold could spy the white caps of the waves as the wind carried them across North Bay. The street was deserted except for a young man moving stove wood from a battered car up to a box in front of a closed chemists' store. Barnsby checked the address against the card that Montgomery's landlady had been kind enough to give him. The small bookshop seemed to be their destination, although the old lady had not mentioned it; the card had just an address. The sign over the door read "Franklin & Son Fine Books." From where they were standing, Arnold and Barnsby were not visible from the windows of the shop. Arnold had dragged the little Englishman out of the line of sight on purpose.

A cold wind from the bay whipped up, rocking the bare upper branches of the trees in the park, making a low sound like leaves being blown by the wind; but the leaves were all long gone. Arnold considered their options. Barnsby and he had discussed the possibilities on the way back from Whitby by train. The card old William gave them somehow seemed too easy a lead to have found so quickly. Barnsby had suggested perhaps the author, Montgomery, had been hired by the Abwehr agent to look into the history of Jermyn House. This seemed likely, but something about it didn't feel right. Perhaps, Arnold thought, the agent believed there could be no harm in asking about an abandoned manor house, because it seemingly had nothing to do with the war. This sounded much more probable. Spies were caught through apparently innocuous mistakes all the time. The first German agent captured in the United States was apprehended when he offered his passport to a toll booth operator on the Williamsburg Bridge.

"Are you strapped, Al?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did you bring a gun?" Arnold smiled despite himself.

"Oh. No. It's at the Esplinade." The Esplinade was their hotel in south Scarborough.

"Great."

"Ought I have?" Barnsby asked quietly, his eyebrows raised.

"Never mind, Al."

"I could go back."

"Forget it."

"Well, anyway, you finally will get to see why I was sent on this assignment," Barnsby said with a smirk. "Let's go, Tom." The little man began to walk off and Arnold stopped him.

"Whoa there, pardner. If any funny business should happen to occur, just hit the floor, all right?"

"Certainly. You can count on me, Tom."

"Good."

As the door to the small, cluttered bookshop opened a pleasant tinkle of bells sounded, bringing a thin, dark-haired man with glasses out from the back room. The clerk appeared young, but the lines around his eyes indicated he was older than he looked, and the glasses made him distinguished, like a professor. His face was thin and sharp, with a beak-like nose and high arching eyebrows which made him appear to wear a haughty expression all the time. His clothing was ordinary, a bit cheap, but obviously recently purchased. In short, he looked like an English bookstore clerk.

"Michael Montgomery?" Barnsby asked with a winning smile. To Arnold's amazement he removed one of his gloves and offered his hand to the clerk from across the room, walking forward with it outstretched.

"Yes? May I help you?" Montgomery replied in a northern English accent. He locked hands with Barnsby perfunctorily, half heartedly returning the little man's greeting. Everything appeared to go normally—for about a second. At the point he realized everything was going wrong, Arnold could see Montgomery's arm stiffen and his head come up. Montgomery looked like Barnsby had just given his hand a strong and inappropriate squeeze, although Barnsby looked frozen in place. The clerk's eyes opened wide and he looked back at Arnold, not at his face, but at his jacket. The haughty expression suddenly disappeared from Montgomery's face and was immediately replaced with one of the blackest, most absolute hate Arnold had ever seen.

Shit, shit, shit, Arnold thought and fumbled for his gun, working the button straps to free it from his shoulder rig. The rig beneath his jacket, which showed through it as a gun bulge—something about that thought stuck with him, then he had it; the bastard had been looking for his gun! Arnold wanted to scream to Barnsby but that would have taken too much time. His gun pulled free and came up in slow motion. It felt like an anxiety dream to Arnold, where no matter how fast you go, it never is fast enough. For the first time the .45 felt heavy in his hands.

Lightning-quick Montgomery brought a chunk of polished marble from on top of a pile of papers down on Barnsby's head. Barnsby just took the hit, he didn't even try to block it with his free arm. An amazing sound like a coconut being stuck by a hammer resounded as the marble connected with

Barnsby's head, and only then did he let go of Montgomery's hand. The little man fell, crashing headlong into a small display table of books, sending dozens of volumes flying, and then struck the ground.

Arnold realized he had been watching Barnsby when he should have been watching Montgomery, or whoever the hell the clerk was. To rectify the situation Arnold let go with his .45, tracing a scattered line of holes across the clerk's counter. The sound of the gun was overwhelming in the tiny shop—a ringing remained in the air for seconds after each shot. As Arnold dove for cover behind a display table, knocking it over to block Montgomery's line of fire, out of the corner of his eye he saw the clerk come up with a huge blue-steel shotgun. The weapon looked very at home in the clerk's hands.

Arnold didn't think. He dove to the left, behind a stone outcropping which acted as a ceiling support. A second later a huge hole ripped through the table where his chest had been. The front window shattered into a million pieces, spraying the street with razor-sharp shards of glass. Arnold took the risk and let go again, emptying his pistol, cutting jagged wood-splintered holes into the swinging door to the back room. A door somewhere in the back room slammed shut with a bang. The clerk had gone. Arnold considered running after him, but dropped the idea almost as soon as it had formed. MI-5 ran the tightest counter-intelligence system this side of the Kremlin. Sooner rather than later, Arnold knew, they'd pick Montgomery up. Besides, no one needed a running gun battle through the streets of Scarborough, especially one starring an American intelligence officer.

Arnold replaced the magazine in his .45 and ran over to Barnsby, who had pulled himself up to a sitting position in a corner, holding his head in both hands, trying to staunch the flow of blood. His entire face was a mask of red, although his eyes seemed alert. He glanced up at Arnold and smiled through all the blood.

Arnold said, "Shit! Barnsby, are you all right? What the hell were you doing?"

"Smooth, eh? He's Abwehr, Tom," Barnsby said thickly, spitting out a wad of blood which had flowed into his mouth.

"Really? You think so? Is this your special skill—finding spies by getting clocked by them?"

"His name is Albrecht Rahn. He's a sleeper. Been here since '36. His code name is Summer. He has a safehouse in Wear Head in the mountains. That's where he's going...ahh." Barnsby was prodding around the wound with one gloved hand. Blood continued to pour out of it in amazing quantities, drenching his coat, shirt, and even his pants.

"You knew all this and didn't tell me?" Arnold could not believe what he was hearing.

"No, no, I shook his hand." Barnsby pushed himself up, unsteadily, to his feet, presenting his naked blood-stained hand to Arnold as if to illustrate the point. Arnold waited for the punchline. He began to think that Barnsby had lost a few marbles in that last round.

“And?” Arnold let the question hang. As his hearing returned to normal, in the distance he could make out the whistles of the local constables as they rushed to the scene of the gunplay.

“I saw all of it. He was thinking in German. I saw his mind,” Barnsby replied, in a harsh whisper.

“I think you better sit down, pardner. You took a bad hit.”

Barnsby laughed and spit a bit of blood into a now completely red handkerchief.

“What’s so funny?”

“I saw your mind too, in the parlor at the manor,” Barnsby offered.

“What did you see?” Arnold asked, taking his identification card from his breast pocket.

“A man who misses his brother very much,” Barnsby said, solemn faced, pressing the red cloth to his head. They could both hear people approaching, running frantically up the pavement towards their position. Arnold replaced his gun in his shoulder holster.

“So what? Anyone could know that.” Arnold turned away, looking through the broken window across the street at the trees in the park.

“I also saw a man who likes my fiancee a little too much for my comfort.” Barnsby laughed as he said this, and Arnold turned around.

“Who?”

“Natalie Greer. Major Cornwall’s secretary. You were thinking about it when we touched. I saw it in your mind.” Barnsby touched his finger to the clot of tacky blood on his forehead and considered it carefully. “I could likely use someone else’s mind, right now. Mine seems to be leaking out.” He laughed and Arnold stared at him with wonder.

“You’re one of Cornwall’s Talents,” Arnold muttered numbly.

“I am one of Cornwall’s Talents,” Barnsby replied.

The bobbies arrived and the two men presented their identification.

Albrecht Rahn, a.k.a. Michael Mark Montgomery, a.k.a Abwehr Agent Summer was captured in

a raid on his safe house in Wear Head the following morning. The unit involved in the capture had all of Summer's codes and passwords through some miracle in intelligence gathering (no one knew these and other vital clues were gathered through Barnsby's special "Talent"). The MI-5 team was able to draw the enemy agent out into the open where he could be subdued easily. A general media silence was thrown over the whole incident, including the unfortunate shoot-out in Scarborough.

Agent Summer turned almost immediately when confronted with the rather one-sided option British intelligence offered him. It was either continue his broadcasts to Berlin under the auspices of British counterintelligence, feeding the Reich messages Churchill wanted to put in the Fuhrer's ear, or face a firing squad. To the haughty, self-centered German there was no choice, really. He would be absorbed by England's growing Double-Cross system, which by 1942 had transformed over thirty-five Axis spies into double agents and engulfed much of the English Abwehr network, along with most of the British MI-5 staff in the bargain. British intelligence officers had to act in all capacities to control a turned agent. MI-5 officers acted as case officers, translators, drivers, and even cooks for the turned agents. Often one turned agent required more than seven fully briefed officers to handle him properly. This number seemed to be steadily growing, with no visible end to the incredibly advantageous and delicate program in sight. The prime minister believed its benefits were worth the drain on labor. Recruitment for the British intelligence sections had been increased to fill the gap in manpower.

Summer surrendered a case full of coded transmissions that contained a great deal about the history of Jermyn House, which he had located in his instructed search in November 1942 and had transmitted back to Berlin later that month. He knew very little, it seemed, about why the Nazis required the information. Several facts relevant to the PISCES/DELTA GREEN investigation were discovered among these papers. Summer had found documentation about another man who had been interested in Jermyn House, or at least in its last lord, Arthur Jermyn. The man was an American who stayed at the manor house as Sir Jermyn's guest for more than a week in October of 1912, drawn, it seemed, by Jermyn's interest in occult lore.

This American was Professor Nathaniel Peaslee. Although no records existed to indicate what the two spoke of during his stay at Jermyn House, it seemed Peaslee had been on a tour of the principle cities of Europe in that year, perusing private libraries on the continent for occult literature. Arthur Jermyn's interest in the occult aspects of African religions and his extensive library of rare volumes were well known to the staffs of many universities. While visiting Durham University, Peaslee was directed to the Jermyn estate to further his research. Summer believed Peaslee went to Jermyn House to search the lord's library for occult information.

Little else about Peaslee was mentioned in the spy's text, except that he later purchased a rather costly 1768 monograph called ***Observation on the Several Parts of Africa*** from Durham University. This book had been penned by Arthur Jermyn's great-great grandfather Sir Wade Jermyn, who died in the madhouse at Huntington, screaming about a lost city in the middle of the Congo in which certain unmentionable creatures lived. Research and Analysis at PISCES headquarters had failed to locate a copy of the book in Britain, which suddenly seemed terribly important to the Nazi Parsifal investigation. Two copies of it were known to be on the continent and were by now probably in Nazi hands.

Was the ape thing discovered by the Karotechia in the crate in Antwerp an inhabitant of Sir Wade Jermyn's lost Congo city? DELTA GREEN and PISCES agreed it was likely that was exactly what the Karotechia believed, especially considering the lengths to which their experiments on the coast of Normandy had gone to before they were stopped. But what had Sir Wade's book told them? What had Sir Arthur Jermyn and Professor Peaslee discussed? Of what possible interest could a ruined city be to the Nazi war effort?

Donovan, Cook and Cornwall met in the aftermath of the seizure of Agent Summer and concurred. Further information was needed before a mission into the Congo would be planned, if there was to be one at all. The copy of ***Observation on the Several Parts of Africa*** that was in America needed to be located and studied by PISCES Research and Analysis, and Professor Peaslee needed to be questioned. Major Cornwall dispatched several agents to the Belgian Congo to join up with the British intelligence groups in the area and keep an eye out "for the Hun," just in case the Karotechia was prepared to enter the jungles there in search of the grey city.

On January 12, 1943, OSS officer 1st Lieutenant Thomas Arnold and PISCES officer Lieutenant Alan Barnsby left the Southampton docks for the United States of America to pursue a book penned by a madman, and to find its owner, the inscrutable Professor Peaslee.

INTERLUDE 3:
The man in the black coat turns

January 22, 1943: Bary, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

The assassin had been sent through time into the body of a human child both to assure that the greatest portion of its knowledge survived the transfer and to decrease the likelihood that it would be detained by human authorities. Often, the simple brains of humans were far too small to contain the alien minds of the Great Race and much information was lost in the exchange of intellects, just as water may overfill and spill from a tiny receptacle. Excess knowledge was permanently lost. Such was the price of time travel. The brains of immature humans, however, had a higher capacity for the storage of information, much more so than the adults of their species. The assassin's intellect was vast, so the Motion chose a juvenile human to suit the alien's needs.

The Motion existed in every time where the Great Race traveled. The Motion comprised individuals from lesser species who had discovered the existence of the Great Race and had chosen to revel in the destruction of their own cultures. The Motion aided the agents of the Great Race, teaching the language, customs, and history of their cultures to those who needed such information, in exchange for technological trinkets and the Race's good favor. The assassin had come forward in time from the early Paleocene era, an era ruled by the Great Race, guided by a human group of the Motion who had constructed one of the Great Race's mind-transfer machines on their modern Earth.

It had no pronounceable name in human times, and was simply called One by the members of the Motion. In ancient Pnakotus it was known as the entity who was sent to render justice to wrongdoing, a constable of sorts, and its title was translated into human analog roughly as One Who Is Many Places at Once. Unbeknownst to a vast majority of the Great Race, it traveled throughout time capturing and destroying those of its race who betrayed the chosen line of temporal advancement. Most in Pnakotus thought that their civilization was assured, that their populace was content and that their knowledge was unlimited. But the Great Race, like any other sentient species, held secrets. Even with the strictest safeguards, agents sent through time to further the goals of the Race often defected. The reasons for these betrayals were numerous, but they often stemmed from chemical imbalances inflicted upon the minds of the agents by their newly acquired biological forms. The problems remained no matter what steps were taken to prevent them. So a whole class of citizens of Pnakotus, such as One, rose up to fill the need of their culture. They became the solution decreed by the elders of Pnakotus; a network of assassins throughout time.

The sealed records of the future of the Earth were constantly monitored by the learned elders of the Great Race in the ancient library of Pnakotus. This was the library's sole purpose, to note eddies and changes in the times they recorded. Why else would such great lengths be taken to create the most magnificent library in earth's history only to leave it in ruin in the midst of the

Australian desert? When the authors of the documents returned to their times, occasionally, the recollections within the documents would shift. Only the elders had access to these original records, and only the elders knew of the great grey area which existed in the midst of human history. While some portions in time would occasionally shift, this great grey spot in time, an area of constant flux, consumed most of the Great Race's effort. This turbulent era was constantly changing along with records from these times, reflecting a natural maelstrom in history which needed to be continuously corrected to assure the future of the Great Race. Agents were sent forward again and again to guarantee the final outcome of human civilization—the seeding of earth's atmosphere with sufficient radiation to assure the development of the beetle species which the Great Race would come to inhabit in the far-distant future.

One had jumped forward to the very edge of the grey area in human history, to pursue the races' greatest traitor, once the most trusted agent of the elders of Pnakotus. One would enjoy expunging the traitor from existence, and would surely succeed where lesser assassins had failed. The traitor was crafty and powerful, but certainly by now its intellect had degraded. The traitor had jumped through many forms, each time losing a bit of its intellect to the limits of the human brain. Soon it would be no match for One, however renowned its intellect had once been.

The inconsequential humans of the Motion had supplied One with the necessary electronics for the hunt. It had then spent some time on modern Earth preparing its arsenal to destroy the prey. Now the pursuit had begun. That final precipice in time, the instant of death, would consume all who stood in One's way...

The primitive vehicle navigated down a disordered, roaming path which was inefficiently tiled; great gaps in the surface hindered the vehicle's performance. Multi-level constructions randomly littered the landscape in ill-conceived grids, within which the space-obsessed humans made their insignificant lives. In a dim imitation of Pnakotus, the humans had begun, in this portion of their epoch, to gather in numbers, although no good seemed to come of this advancement. The vehicle continued to travel for a time, until it had left the urban center and instead was rolling on the most rudimentary of paths surrounded by unmanicured wilderness on all sides. The jumbled peaks of distant, rounded mountains, backlit by the falling sun, reminded One once more of the desperate savagery of this time. Humans still lived in consequence of nature, a fact the assassin found highly revolting.

The humans of the Motion flanked One in the center of the vehicle. It sat very still while the humans surrounding it fidgeted. It looked like a small, somber child dressed in dark clothing, its hair combed to match human custom, its hands folded politely in its lap. It held a small device which looked like half of a telephone receiver. One considered the device, which let out a low and steady hum. Suddenly, the tone emitted by the device rose several octaves and took on an odd, ululating resonance.

"Stop," the child's body said in a small voice.

Contact with previous pursuers of the traitor (those that survived the encounter) had indicated that the criminal had recovered restricted texts from the ruins of Pnakotus on modern Earth, a fact which was not lost on One. These "books" were unusual by human standards and were easy to

isolate, so although it was impossible for the traitor to be tracked itself, its equipment could be located through the use of the simple device One had created. It had proven quite easy. The trail had led straight to the traitor's retreat.

The human construction was isolated in a field of frozen water precipitate, surrounded by deciduous fir trees. There were no other constructions within the area. The small, single-level building had been fabricated of local plant stock and simple pieces of alloyed minerals. Panes of glazed sand hung in gaps in the walls, forming portals to the outside. A single, vertical pivot formed a gate to the interior, although the gate remained closed. Cloth had been hung in the portals to obscure the interior.

One and its agents exited the vehicle. The Motion men carried human-made lightning guns of Great Race design, crooked to their shoulders in a martial stance. These devices, shaped vaguely like rifles but made of solid bronze, could emit searing rays of electricity and were far in advance of anything humans possessed. One itself held a small, box-like device, which none of the Motion could identify but which they assumed was a weapon. One approached the portal slowly, cautiously observing the situation with the limited range of human senses. A single trail of indentations in the precipitate indicated the traitor was inside.

A sign above the filthy door read "SHAFT #42." The words meant nothing to One.

"Wait. I will go." A human who served the Motion stepped forward and put its hand to the portal mechanism, cradling the lightning gun in one forelimb. The human was obviously attempting to gain the assassin's good favor. One could not yet tell the human traits of facial expressions for what they were, although he knew muscle configurations on the human skull indicated emotional responses; he had studied human anatomy for some time. The Motion agent's orbicular oris muscles were drawn down taut, and its frontalis muscle was pulled back, raising the hair patches near its orbital cavities—but what this implied One could not determine. The assassin also noted a thin sheen of water precipitate on the skin of the human. These responses were mirrored on the faces of the other humans present, so they most likely represented emotional and not physical responses to stimuli. The other Motion men stepped forward to flank the door.

The Motion agent pushed the door wide. The assassin noted a scraping sound on the floor as the portal swung open. Inside the structure, past the slowly widening gap, the assassin could perceive a terrible red, blue, and green pulsating light. It was a familiar perception. The light reminded One of cities in ruin, of endless seas of rippling immaterial beasts as they poured from beneath the earth and consumed Pnakotus, of an evil so all-encompassing that even the Great Race could not resist it. The assassin turned and ran as the whistling and screams began.

The juvenile musculature of the child's shell could not carry One into the safety of the wilderness fast enough. Behind it the ear-splitting cracks of the lightning guns sounded—but only twice. The Motion agents died in seconds, emitting awful gurgling screams as they were pulled into the gelatinous, not wholly material body of the thing. The assassin fled into a gathering of trees, fumbling with its box in a desperate attempt to save its mind from the impending death of its shell. It did not look back but could feel a smooth and unnatural wind caress the shell's skin, like fingers playing across foreign objects in the dark.

Then, the terrible whistling growing ever closer. One snatched another small box from its pocket and retreated further, desperately adjusting components in the device as it stumbled to a snow drift opposite the trees it had been hiding behind. The shell that carried its mind collapsed from exhaustion, barely able to consume enough air to keep its blood fully oxygenated. One rolled over on its back, closed the box and pointed it at the copse of trees. The construction beyond the trees and the bodies of the Motion agents were not visible. One gathered its thoughts and prepared for death. From beyond the cluster of trunks a flashing blue, green, and red aura reflected off the snow, illuminating the scene with an eerie purple light, growing closer.

A shearing, high-pitched shriek shattered the scene, bursting one of the shell's hearing membranes and causing its eyes to water. The beast had detected its presence. The creature that came for One represented the single thing that the Great Race could not conquer and would never fully destroy. It would come for the assassin and erase its mind from existence; all it had worked so hard to gather, expunged forever.

The shell's tiny hands began to waver and shake. One found that its mind was endlessly repeating the single thought of its own mortality, over and over again. The shell's eyes emitted a salty, sight-obscuring liquid, and One found its control over the the shell failing. The shell relieved itself, abruptly voiding the body of all waste products.

The enemy appeared through the trees suddenly. A roiling mass of pockmarked red-green jelly, floating improbably five feet off the ground. A halo of purplish light played off it, illuminating the tiny cul-de-sac in an unearthly glow. Its gelatinous form slithered through the mass of the trees, pulling its atoms through gaps in the atomic structure, searing them, leaving behind dead husks. Portions of the beast phased in and out of existence, appearing and disappearing as it wove its way through the trees, slowly slipping through them to the other side to consume the assassin. Odd five-toed footprints sank slowly into the seamless snow, appearing it seemed of their own accord, and pushed deeper as the beast pulled itself forward on invisible legs.

One recovered control of the shell and pointed its box at the clutch of trees. This device of the Great Race remained useless against the enemy because they were not wholly material, but One could target those things that the beasts passed through. One triggered the box-like device with the press of a small button on its side, and instantly the entire area was lost in an immense, bright white flash. All sight was obliterated instantly; even through the closed lids of the shell's eyes, the flash was enormous. One turned over and stood clumsily, completely blind yet ready to run.

The next second a deafening wet noise sounded and One was suddenly covered in a foul-smelling, jelly-like liquid which knocked the assassin to the ground and coated it in a crashing wave. Slowly, the eyes of the shell recovered and its blood oxygen level returned to normal, One, victorious, turned to survey the scene of destruction.

A huge, half-moon gap was cut through the copse of trees which had stood just moments before. Two great oblong teardrops on either side of the trees were covered in the remains of the great enemy, a thick, viscous black jelly which smelled of ozone and oil. One had removed the trees, and with them the atoms of the great enemy as they slithered within the form, instantly slicing the

beast in two. The assassin had succeeded in killing that which its race feared most.

One stumbled forward towards the structure, its shell's legs still shaky.

The assassin considered the remains of the three Motion agents scattered near the opening into the structure. The lightning guns they once held were the only portions of them to remain undamaged. Their bodies were desiccated and burned and their clothes had disintegrated, leaving stick-thin, shriveled, mummy-like forms lying peacefully on the snow. There was no blood, or any liquid left to leak from the broken bodies.

The inside of the structure was one room built around what looked like a vertical mine shaft. A series of Great Race texts were stacked neatly to one side of the room along with assorted equipment. Drawn on the floor in chalk sediment was a diagram recognized by the assassin. As ancient as Pnakotus, the pentagram was a ward against the great enemy and could keep them at bay indefinitely, as long as they were not in numbers. They had been used in ancient times by the Great Race to seal the beasts beneath the earth. And they were used after the fall of Pnakotus, when the time was right, to seal the great enemy once more beneath the earth in stasis.

Now the traitor had used it as a weapon. Somehow—from reading the secret texts of Pnakotus, no doubt—the traitor had learned to release the great enemy and bind them. It had sealed the beast with the pentagram and left the texts behind as a lure for One. When the portal had been opened, the metal flap on the bottom of the portal had scraped clean a portion of the sigil, rendering it powerless and instantly releasing the beast—a potent trap.

The traitor was far more clever and dangerous than One had believed.

The assassin set out to consult the council for further orders.

On a street in Boston, at the moment the door to the small shack in Bary swung wide, an older man suddenly froze in midstep on the sidewalk and let out a hoarse cry of pain. Surrounded as he was in the midst of Fulton Street, many people came to his aid, offering to call a doctor or perhaps a police officer for assistance. But the man with the salt and pepper beard politely and insistently declined.

Shrugging off all inquiries as to his health with a wave of his hand and a smile, the man in the black coat turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 11:
Deep in the soul of impulse, memory

January 28, 1943: Arkham, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Nine days on a ship in the icy waters of the North Atlantic and now a New England winter, Arnold thought morosely to himself. Barnsby, on the other hand, seemed far more chipper than usual as they moved across the snowy campus of Miskatonic University, which was just resuming classes following Christmas break. As Arnold watched him Barnsby even began whistling. The fourteen stitches on the little man's head, the remnants of his unfortunate run-in with the Abwehr agent in Scarborough, were quite prominent on his pale skin but nearly ready to come out. The criss-cross scars made it look like he had been treated by Dr. Frankenstein himself. The scar rippled on his forehead when he talked or smiled, as he was doing now. The further away from England Barnsby got, the happier he seemed.

Arnold could feel the weight lifted from his shoulders too, as though England were a little too close to the giants' den of the Third Reich for comfort. It somehow seemed much safer here in America. The war was some distant thing, although both men knew it grew closer every day. No one they had seen here in the States held the harried look of the English, of people living every day within bomber range.

The university was overflowing with foot traffic. Students, excited to be back but somewhat disappointed at the same time, stood beneath huge baroque stone arches to get out of the wind, talking in small groups. Others hung their heads out windows to shout out into the winter air across the quadrangle. Those out in the wind did nothing but hurry toward their destinations, heads down, hoods up and gloves on to protect against the vicious wind.

"That's it." Arnold pointed up at the jutting roof of the University Library, which cut a bizarre zig-zag against the stark white sky. The American flag whipped dramatically in the air above the building, the only bit of color visible in the arctic conditions; the chill in the air seemed to consume color itself. Barnsby and Arnold walked carefully around a groundskeeper who was shoveling the light covering of snow from the steps of the building with an ancient, worn spade, the plume of his breath trailing in the air behind him like a scarf. The man did not acknowledge them or even look up. He simply grunted as he flung another shovel-load of snow onto a bush to the side of the steps, almost striking Barnsby as he brought the shovel back to the ground.

"Excuse me," Barnsby chirped and tipped his hat.

"Damn kids," the groundskeeper replied.

Inside the nearly boiling foyer of the library, Barnsby fumbled to wipe his glasses with a small

rag. Already groups of students were gathered at the huge mahogany tables, consumed in their reading. A cold white light spilled in through the huge, cathedral-like windows, illuminating the room with a pearlescent glow.

"Upstairs?" Barnsby asked, glancing through his glasses to check the lenses, watching the traffic on the isolated, green carpeted staircase.

"Another psychic news flash?" Arnold snickered, weaving around tables towards the stairs.

"No, just that the sign on the door up there says 'Peaslee'," Barnsby smirked, and placed his glasses back on carefully.

"Nobody likes a smart guy, Al," Arnold said and smiled. The two walked briskly up the stairs, banishing the last bit of winter numbness from their legs. On the second level of the library, a small U-shaped walkway led around to a cluster of more than a dozen faculty offices. The door in front of the two men read "Professor Wingate Peaslee." They had found who they were looking for.

Having poked around Boston for a bit when they first got off the boat, they had attempted to hunt down Professor Nathaniel Peaslee. Instead of locating his address they found his death certificate, which informed them that the senior Peaslee had died in 1940 of a stroke at his home in Arkham. The records indicated his son, Wingate Peaslee, had inherited the old man's estate and now taught psychology at Miskatonic University, the elder Peaslee's former place of employment. Two days later, here they were.

Barnsby knocked.

"Come in, Charles," a baritone voice offered from behind the sand blasted glass.

Arnold opened the door.

A middle-aged man in a U.S. army uniform considered them with a confused but friendly stare. His shoulder markings indicated he was a second lieutenant. The name tag on his coat read "W. Peaslee." His beady eyes seemed somewhat too small for his face, but they spoke of almost a feral intelligence, the kind which could circumvent catastrophe through the most direct and base responses. He seemed like a man who would do well when lives were on the line. His mouth was wide and filled with uneven yellowed teeth, which he showed in his somewhat careful smile, and his hair was a thick and wavy black, combed back and shaved at the sides. He looked, to Arnold, like a hot dog salesman in military dress.

"Professor Peaslee?" Arnold asked placidly.

"Yes? I'm sorry, I was expecting a student—"

"May we speak to you? I am First Lieutenant Thomas Arnold and this is my associate,

Lieutenant Barnsby. I believe the Army office in Boston called you?"

"Certainly, gentlemen. I was just packing the last of my things, here." Peaslee placed his hat on his empty desk and sat in a rolling chair. He gestured to the couch with a ring-covered hand. "Sit, please."

"It's about your father."

Peaslee's eyebrows rose slowly and he looked up at Arnold, trying, it seemed, to stare through his calm expression into his very thoughts.

"Yes? May I see some identification, please?"

Barnsby and Arnold offered their identification cards. After Peaslee's brief perusal they sat back down.

"How much do you know about all this, Mr...um...Lieutenant Arnold?"

"Well, that's hard to say. We were hoping we could take a look at his library and gain access to your father's notes pertaining to the fall of 1912."

"I'm afraid my father's notes from that period are unavailable." Peaslee stood up.

"And why is that?" Barnsby asked.

"Why don't you read the medical journals? I, quite frankly, am fed up with people staring at me when I explain my father's curious life."

"We've led curious lives ourselves. Perhaps we could offer some insight," Barnsby suggested, his eyes filled with understanding.

Peaslee glanced down at his hands on his desk for some time. He looked up again briefly before suddenly saying:

"For five years, ending in 1912, something inhabited the form of my father. Nothing it wrote remains in my possession. When you showed up, I assumed you read the American psychological journals from the Twenties... " Peaslee watched them carefully. For a long while the only audible noises were the students ruminating below on the quadrangle and the click of the electric clock.

"So? You're still interested in my lunatic ramblings?" Peaslee laughed and sat back down.

"Go on," was all Barnsby said.

"You don't know how many times I have had this conversation. Let me congratulate you two. You are the first to stay through the introduction with straight faces." Peaslee smirked and steepled

his fingers. “My associates here wag their fingers at their temples when I walk by, and talk around campus about the Mad Peaslees is cheap. Even my commanding officers think I’m cracked. But I assure you, I have seen things which have marked my father’s testimony in my mind as fact. Even today, three years after his death, the things he wrote about after his ordeal continue to come true.”

“Such as?” Barnsby asked.

“The world war. He first wrote about it in the summer of 1936, after the dreams reached a crescendo. Everything about it. Where, when. Who. Even how it ends. So far, it’s all come to pass.”

“But how could he know these things?” Arnold piped up, watching Barnsby’s eyes search Peaslee’s face.

“I don’t really know. Even his notes are vague, and they are all basically dreams written down. Father spent the last five years of his life writing them down.”

“Do you think we could look at his notes and possessions?” Barnsby asked, standing up with a painted smile on his face. Arnold watched as the little man deliberately ungloved his right hand. It reminded him of a man slowly unsheathing a knife.

“Certainly. I am leaving tonight, I’m afraid, but Caroline, the woman at the house, will let you look at whatever you wish. I shall let her know you are coming by.”

Peaslee and Barnsby shook hands slowly, Arnold tensed, waiting for the scene. Their was no epiphany or seizure as the two men locked hands. Barnsby finally pulled his hand away and placed his glove back on. Peaslee looked at the little British man for a moment and then smiled wanly.

“Good day.”

“We may be contacting you in the future,” Arnold said, and shut the door.

Arnold and Barnsby exited into the chill of College Street. Clusters of people passed, rushing toward warmer destinations, ignoring the two agents. Several bold motorists skidded down the ice-lined streets, unmindful of the danger.

“So?” Arnold mumbled through his scarf.

“He believes he’s telling the truth,” Barnsby replied.

“Shit.” Arnold suddenly stopped and looked down at the ground. “We should have gotten his address.”

“I already did.” Barnsby held up his right hand, smiled, and continued walking, leaving Arnold behind in the snow.

Thirty notebooks in the late Professor Peaslee's tiny, cramped writing lay stacked on the dining room table in the Peaslee house. Barnsby hovered over them like a buzzard, flipping through the volumes, leaving some open on the table and stacking others on an empty chair in an unspecified order. Arnold glanced about the room, bored, and was drawn to a series of photographs hung on the wall closest to the door. In them, a group of men posed in front of a huge stone block in the midst of an immense desert. Wingate and his late father, Nathaniel Peaslee, were visible in the photos, looking sunburned and sunblind. Each photo was labeled "Miskatonic Australian Expedition 1935."

As Barnsby continued to flip through the documents, Arnold looked around the room. The den had been converted to a makeshift library; shelves were covered in precarious stacks of books. The cleaning woman, Caroline, had done just as Professor Peaslee asked; she let them in and dutifully disappeared again. Now their only companions were the chill in the air and the tick of the grandfather clock.

"Listen to this, Tom." Barnsby flipped through a penny notebook labeled "Dreams (August-September 1931)" with his gloved hands.

"I have been dreaming most recently," Barnsby began reading, standing up, with the book opened before him like a hymnal, "of the library again. It is in this immense place, I believe, that I was sent to spend the years of my life which I lost when it took over my body in 1908. These dreams seem to be veiled recollections of actual events which seem too monstrous and unreal to have truly occurred. Still, the dreams continue.

"From all accounts I believe this library was somewhere in the distant past and was populated with creatures completely unlike humanity. Huge, cone-shaped beings of incredible intellect and superior ability, who, although distant, treated me quite kindly, and offered even to let me write down my reminiscences in books of their design." Barnsby looked up at Arnold, whose face was a mask.

"What do you think?" Barnsby folded the book and placed it on the table.

"I don't know what to think about that," Arnold mumbled, and stood up. "But I think we should call Washington and figure out what General Donovan wants us to do with all this." He waved his hands around dramatically, gesturing at the hundreds of occult volumes in their various elaborate piles. "And I think maybe the OSS should take an interest in Second Lieutenant Peaslee, maybe bring him into the fold."

"That's an idea," Barnsby replied, shuffling through the penny notebooks.

“Listen, Al. This psychic mumbo-jumbo you got going, how does it work?”

“It’s a bit difficult to explain.”

“Try me.”

“Very well.” Barnsby looked down at his gloved hands and took a deep breath. It was obvious to Arnold that he never spoke of the ability, and that in doing so now Barnsby was baring a part of his soul.

“Some things are very plain when I touch someone. It seems to have to do with the intensity of the sensation. Even objects sometimes have impressions, which is why I wear the gloves. With you it was all very plain. Sometimes, and this is even more rare, I can see what is going to happen to someone.”

“Does this skill even have a name?”

“Yes. It’s called Psychometry.”

“Are there any others like you?”

“Quite a few, I would think. We know the Polish underground has one. Major Cornwall has found three in his pursuits. I’m the strongest he’s seen.”

“Cornwall made you do a reading on me because of the France mission, eh?” Arnold locked eyes with the little man.

“Yes. We wanted to make sure you had not been...turned...by the Germans.”

“Smart.”

“Yes. Terribly.”

They both laughed.

“Why don’t they use you more often? I mean, I would think you would be pretty valuable...”

“So it would seem, but it causes more problems than it ever solves. No one outside PISCES would believe it anyway, except perhaps the prime minister.” Barnsby shrugged apologetically. “I just don’t get many chances to do what I seem to be suited for. ‘We don’t like to show our position on the battlefield,’ is how the major puts it.”

Arnold stood and lit a cigarette. “The impressions you get from some objects—do you think the senior Peaslee left anything behind for you to lift out with your hands?” He gestured around the room with the cigarette’s smoky tip.

“I thought it was all psychic mumbo-jumbo to you, Tom.”

“You got us here, didn’t you?”

“Well, then,” Barnsby said. He removed a glove from his pale white hand with care and considered the books spread about the table like an artist studying his palette.

There was no barrier which could hold as the memories swept in. No break for the flood of images as they swelled Barnsby’s brain, snuffing all his thoughts out like a harsh wind extinguishing a candle. The little Englishman, notebook clutched in his naked hand, collapsed and twitched on the floor of Wingate Peaslee’s den like a grounded fish.

In the fugue Barnsby, as Nathaniel Peaslee, now three years dead, was dimly aware of the den in Arkham, of Thomas Arnold yelling to him from far away, of a sound like a telephone ringing; but mostly, as the images swelled and rolled through his mind like waves, he was aware of the sheer power of the other place he could see now. A place no human body had ever been—but that was occasionally exposed to the human mind.

Graceful, arcing buildings of red concrete, cast in a scale greater than the pyramids, lay beneath the Paleocene sun, broken by splotches of vibrant green and small arteries of distant elevated roadways carrying alien vehicles swiftly between unknown destinations. Huge cone-shaped creatures milled nearby, sliding slowly up ramps and in and out of the immense buildings, each crawling about on a single, huge footpad, like gigantic slugs. Barnsby’s/Peaslee’s vision was distorted and unclear, washed out like an old color-painted photograph and bent at the edges like a fisheye. He struggled to focus and study the scene beneath him.

The cone creatures extended tentacular limbs from the pinnacles of their cones in manners suggestive of intelligence. Their most prominent limb held giant, bulbous yellow eyes which goggled about; it was flanked by two pincer-tipped tentacles, which often held some metallic, technological trinket. Their fourth tentacle was tipped with bright red, horny protrusions which occasionally emitted a sonorous hum, like the bleating of an elephant. These creatures moved about slowly, oblivious of Barnsby/Peaslee, content to interact with each other and go about their business in this metropolis of the dim past. Distant flocks of what Barnsby/Peaslee hoped were birds fluttered through the rich air miles distant.

Barnsby/Peaslee turned his head to see more of the metropolis and was shocked to discover a huge, rough limb within inches of his distorted vision. He pulled back his head in a sudden, jerking movement and was amazed to find, as his point of view rose to towering heights, that it felt as if his head was floating free of any confinements. Glancing down again, Barnsby/Peaslee found himself looking along the shaft of a long, ridged tentacle which terminated in a massive rugose

cone, attached to the ground by a slimy, muscular, slug-like foot. A flailing movement a second later and the other limb shot back into his field of vision, roiling open like a snake traversing water. At its end was a giant, double bladed claw of ridged green gold. His claw.

Barnsby/Peaslee tried to scream but all that he heard was the low hum of a horn, like that of a distant car. He knew now why none of the cone creature were concerned with his presence. He was one of them.

The primal telepathic ability which toiled in Barnsby's brain began to spin out of control. His strained mind attempted again and again to disengage from the images which flooded all corners of his consciousness, to no avail. The visions spun on, unmindful of their unwilling participant.

In the fugue, more images rattled his brain. Barnsby completely collapsed under their assault, his mind mimicking the long-dead Professor Peaslee's emotions and memories, reflecting them back from the abyss like an echo. The dark wave of memories of a dead man, of a place before man, leapt on the Englishman's mind like a cat pouncing on helpless prey, sending his consciousness deeper into the black than it had ever been before.

In the great library, blue-white light spilled down through circular windows. This vast cloistered space was broken by hundreds of tables and thousands of rectangular shelves which divided the floor into a maze-like track. Octagonal flagstones comprised the floor, flowing with a mathematical elegance towards the walls in odd progressions, defying human reason. Occasionally a single flagstone was missing and in its stead a well-tended palm tree grew. These full-size trees were dwarfed by everything in the room and gave him the first indication of the truly monstrous proportions of the structure. Even the tables were taller than a full-grown man.

Professor Nathaniel Peaslee looked up, disoriented, and realized he was not alone in the colossal vault. Huge, iridescent cone-shaped creatures moved about the floor, caught up in their industriousness, unmindful of the intruder watching them. Their yellow eyes, hanging from tentacle-like limbs, carefully took in their environment or read from their vast catalog of tomes which lined the endless rectangular shelves. Some were even writing in those tomes, utilizing a stylus-like device in a cluster of dexterous filaments that grew from beneath their eyes. The cone creatures wore sacks of woven rough cloth, filled with questionable devices of metallic alienness, some of which they clutched in their long claw-tipped tendril with terrible purpose.

Globes of scintillating crystals illuminated the efforts of these inhuman scholars as they toiled, casting light even in the darkest recesses of the library where the primordial sun could not reach. It reminded Peaslee of a nightmare version of his own library at his school, Miskatonic. It was hard to imagine such a place as this existed, would exist, but the reality of the library before him was undeniable. Peaslee's mind shuddered at the vision, the memory, the experience he had felt in another form a hundred and fifty million years before he had been born. Had he been here before? Why did this all seem familiar?

Why was he here?

Peaslee searched his intellect for information about the creatures and found the task daunting.

His reason floundered in the vast sea of space that he found within his own mind. Time itself seemed inconsequential when confronted with such a vast empty void; seconds passed and shifted within the black, hours, years, rearranging themselves clumsily at his whim. A shock passed through his mind as time re-ordered itself, memories returned, and the confusion and discomfort drifted away.

He had been in the library for more than three years now, answering the questions of the creatures that had brought him here. A race beyond conception and human knowledge, which had predated man and which moved between times and spheres man would never know. It was his understanding that an agent of theirs had taken control of his body, back in his native time, and that he was stuck here in the form of a cone-like creature until that agent returned, at a time they would not reveal to him. Now, he knew, their plans were much less perfect than they intimated.

Like any scientist, he had not wasted the opportunity. He had absorbed as much of what the cone creatures had to offer as possible. Once he had learned the ways of his new form, Peaslee had set about reading from the many books of the Great Library. These books were written in the odd curvilinear handwriting of the Great Race, copied, they claimed, from actual accounts penned by prisoners from various times. Books which revealed the distant past and the future of the Earth were read to him by the fantastic machines of the Great Race in a stilted, mechanical imitation of English. Though this openness might seem a dangerous policy, the Great Race assured him that all memories of these events would be removed from his consciousness by mechanical hypnosis before his return to his own time, and would only remain in the indelible record of his unconscious mind, irretrievable to his conscious self. And so Professor Peaslee read about Earth's future and past.

He read of the proliferation of atomic weapons which would be the primary armament of the human world, created at the close of a second world war. The bored speech of the machine recited the tale of the destruction of the democratic countries a century and a half later as resources dwindled and populations soared. The books remained purposely vague, and often failed to talk about the most basic facts of the future or the past. Peaslee, however, could not resist the call of the machines and stayed for hours listening to their droning cadence, addicted to the terrible possibilities the books promised for the future. This was how Peaslee learned that his new form knew nothing of fatigue or sleep, remaining in the library at all hours, day and night; Peaslee's surrogate body went without rest, absorbing the facts of things to come.

Peaslee set about writing a memoir of his own times for the Great Race, a task to which the cone creatures took with great industry, copying his written English remembrances into their own odd curvilinear hieroglyphs, fascinated by his simple recollections of the early twentieth century. Peaslee was quite open with the members of the Great Race as they asked him endless questions with their droning machines. The inquiries were both mundane and unpredictable; the council of the Great Race was interested in all aspects of human existence in Peaslee's native time.

Occasionally the vast gulfs of time which separated the library and the age of humanity on Earth were revealed in strange questions of the council, which hinted at events that had not yet occurred in Peaslee's age. Questions about such unusual-sounding things as "The Apollo Program," "The Bikini Atoll Tests," and "The Iron Curtain" revealed the general ignorance of the creatures about

the twentieth century, or at least about the common human lifespan. Peaslee learned of many of these odd-sounding things in the antiseptic books of the library. Most took place years or even decades after Peaslee left his time, and some were almost beyond belief. Peaslee, surrounded by the unbelievable, believed it all without question...at first.

He seemed to be subjected to more scrutiny than the other captives of the Great Race. The cone creatures quietly prodded him with various implements to extract increasingly specific facts about his native time. Often he could assure them that such events never occurred, or that he had no knowledge of them. Some were so specific they beggared his imagination. The council questioned him about personal acquaintances and titles of books he had read, or trips he had taken and the amount of time he had spent working on a specific topic, their questions growing more and more baroque as time passed. Soon it dawned on Peaslee that something was different about his captivity. The other wards from various epochs on Earth were never subjected to same the sheer multitude of questions.

During the second year of his captivity things shifted once more. The questions grew in complexity, and the council seemed to have hundreds of them on hand at all times. Often it was all Peaslee did all day, answering endless questions which the council assured him were mundane. He read from the library all night to forget his interrogations.

It was only when they began to ask about his son, Wingate, that Peaslee began to question the morality of the creatures. Initially, he had been so enamored by the aliens' culture that he had failed to look beyond the wonders of their physical world. Now the creatures seemed much more sinister. When they began to repeat the terrible question Peaslee was not sure what to make of it. They asked it over and over again, as if they had not yet asked it, as if they had forgotten it had been put to him a thousand times before. The question terrified him, and clearly illuminated the vast differences between humanity's and the Great Race's conception of time. They seemed to understand very little about the human mind, and thought, perhaps, that Peaslee was just being obstinate. They asked a question he could not answer, the same terrible question in that mechanical voice:

"Why does your offspring Wingate Peaslee exist in the ruins of this library in your time designation 1943?"

Peaslee tried to explain that he could not know what happened in 1943 yet—for him the year was 1912—much less understand what his son (in his mind still a toddler!), would be doing in that year, which seemed impossibly distant to him. The question made him frantic. The seeming impossibility of the facts behind this question made Peaslee first begin to doubt the Great Race's information. Something so basic and close to him as his son assigned a role in time like a puppet, without reason, made his mind rebuke all the books of the Great Library, or at least look at them with a new kind of skepticism. The council seemed unsure of Peaslee's lectures on the human condition. As the years wore on the terrible question became less and less frequent, but still was asked from time to time, as though Peaslee was simply hiding the fact and might blurt it out if surprised.

Other, stranger questions began to surface in its stead. Did he know a man named Thomas

Arnold? Alan Barnsby? Arthur Jermyn? Had he ever heard of a group called the Ahnerebe? Had he ever read a book called ***Observations on the Several Parts of Africa***? Or heard of a place that some called Thule?

His questioning continued long after other captives were left to their own devices. The more he cooperated, it seemed, the more he was allowed access to the Great Library. Still, there were places he was not allowed to venture, even under the watchful eye of his captors. The deeper portions of the library, accessible by the huge ramps which the cone creatures used as stairs, were off-limits to all but a select few.

Although there seemed to be no sentries to guard these forbidden passageways, the laws of the Great Race were strict and final, and there was no question what the result of a trespass (unspoken as it was) would be. After careful consideration and some veiled inquiries, however, Peaslee came to believe that such penalties would not apply to him. He was, after all, inhabiting the body of one of their scholars, and could not be expected to understand all the subtleties of their social order. Just as they held his mind hostage, he held their scholar's body hostage.

Soon, Peaslee's curiosity overcame his desire to please his captors. Although the library was never deserted, Peaslee chose a time during what seemed to be some sort of political rally to make his foray into the depths of the secret library. It was in his third year. Over a period of weeks, tens of millions of the cone creatures had gathered in the endless city which surrounded the library. Peaslee understood it to be something like an election, but one which also held religious meaning which defied clear explanation. All the Great Race appeared to be drawn to the meeting, and few of those that he knew to be menial workers seemed to be at their regular posts. The Great Library was as deserted as he had ever seen it.

One evening at the height of the rally, with an endless "cheer" of clicking claws filling the night air like the cries of huge crickets, Peaslee, seeing none of the creatures at the opening to the basements, crept down the forbidden slope into the vaults beneath the library. A small, luminescent crystal, clutched in his clumsy, surrogate claw, lit his way. Past a huge, hourglass-shaped opening in the enormous sandstone blocks an unlit hangar-like chamber beckoned. Inside, when he crossed the threshold, the ghostly light of the crystal played across the millions of "books" the Great Race had arranged on hundreds of shelves which lined the room. These tomes were of a uniform design, grey-lidded metal boxes which opened to reveal hundreds of pages of a clear fibrous cellulose which was invulnerable to damage.

Peaslee's initial disappointment vanished when he realized that he had found the original texts which formed the source of the library above, the "hand"-written recollections of minds snatched from myriad times by the Great Race. Pertinent content from them had been copied into the books which formed the library above, transcribed by calligraphers who translated the various languages into the hieroglyphic scrawl of the Great Race. Peaslee had often wondered why such effort was taken. Why not just stock the library above with the original texts, when machines to translate them were available so readily and worked so well?

The portion of the shelving nearest to the doors concerned later Earth history - Peaslee recognized the looping sigil in the Great Race's script which represented his species. Peaslee

fumbled through the gray binders clumsily, flipping each open in turn, searching for the familiar Latin characters. Soon enough he stumbled upon a dozen binders which had been set aside, written in scrawled, clumsy letters of English:

...so there was nothing to be done. At night the skies burned, lit by the glowing things which turned the war around almost immediately. Enemies became allies, but still nothing seemed to stop them, whatever they were, from over-running first Africa, and then Europe. It went quick, less than two months and Europe was gone. England too. I never thought Speer, Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt would sit together at the same table. But they did, for all the good it did them.
Already, the Russo-Japanese front was crumbling; this was late 1945, you see. And the talk from America, that was my home, was that we would not be far behind. Troops piled on troops to stop the advance of the things—there really isn't any other word I can think of to describe them—but men never came back from the front, and then the president told the world about the Bomb. The atom bomb, like Professor Einstein had worked out

Peaslee watched in horror as the text he was reading disappeared before him, fading out like a lampwick slowly dimmed. For a frantic second, the page remained absolutely blank, and Peaslee feared he had triggered some sort of security device. Then, seconds later, the writing was replaced with new writing, fading in like a magic trick, in an identical hand-written scrawl which read:

...1945. They formed the United Nations, I think. I remember reading about it, anyway, in the New York Post. New York is a big city, like here, which I lived in when the war ended. I was going to fight in the Pacific (that's an ocean) on islands there to stop Japan (an enemy country) from taking more territory from America (that's my country), but the war ended abruptly thanks to the A-Bomb. The atom bomb, like Professor Einstein had worked out.

Peaslee's clawed "hand" flipped to another page and watched it carefully. Over a period of minutes it flickered and changed nine times, its contents shifting, but never settling, often retelling the same events over and over again, but sometimes the narrative was so different that Peaslee could hardly believe what he was seeing. He snatched another random book from the shelves and watched as it too shifted like waves on the ocean.

Dropping the haunted book to the tiles Peaslee fled the vault, terrified at the disorder which was the true basis of the culture above. It seemed even the council of the Great Race knew nothing

about the future, the true future, except that it would occur one way or another. Like humans, they were subject to the perils of time. Peaslee realized that the library above was just a placebo, an explanation—a sampling of that the general public were allowed to peruse, which would keep the council in unquestioned authority.

Peaslee had uncovered, to his own dismay, that in many ways the seemingly perfect society of the Great Race was almost exactly identical to that of his native time.

CHAPTER 12:
Circumstance and time conspire

February 19, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Commander Martin Cook looked tired and disheveled when Arnold entered the spacious room housed in the Department of the Army, Civil Affairs Building on Mercator Avenue. The room and other facilities were on loan from the Chief of Staff, in compliance with orders from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in D.C. Wild Bill had pulled strings and rubbed elbows to fine effect with some of the top army brass in London, who seemed pleased that the OSS was coming together so easily, despite the fact that army intelligence appeared to be floundering. Besides, anyone in command with a brain knew Donovan had the president's ear, and the president was a willful, intelligent, and very vengeful man with absolute control over the military.

Unfortunately other matters in North Africa had called Donovan away, and he could not make it to the states for the update on the investigation into Project Parsifal. Cook, eyes bloodshot and hands shaking, appeared in his stead.

Arnold hung his hat and sat down in a plush leather seat.

"Tom," Cook said in way of greeting and looked out the window.

"Commander," Arnold replied, and glanced at the scattered contents of his desk. Two manila files lay open amidst a sea of disordered papers and photos along with a near empty bottle of Jack Daniels, a .45 automatic, and an assortment of loose cartridges.

"So...fill me in," the old man said and slowly sank into his chair with a grunt.

"Me and Barnsby followed up some leads here about Peaslee...it's in the report. You read it? Well, Barnsby tried some of his voodoo on one of the doc's books and, well...you know I guess...he's still in the hospital. Oh, and we found the book. The ***Observations on the Several Parts of Africa*** in the Peaslee's kid's study."

"Yeah, I read the report about it...by...what's his name. The guy we got from Miskatonic?"

"The Africa guy? Smith. Dr. Smith."

"Yeah, him. It looks pretty grim. It's almost certainly true. All of it. Though thankfully only the Nazis and us know anything about it."

"Listen, are you guys going to bring Wingate Peaslee in on this? He could probably help us

out."

"Already done. He's on his way to Australia along with Mark Steuben." Cook looked up at Arnold through heavy-lidded, dog-brown eyes. Mark Steuben, another OSS/DELTA GREEN man, had been with Arnold on the beach at the Cap de la Hague, raining shells down on the innocent and the damned. For some reason it was hard for Arnold to imagine Mark and Peaslee together. It was even harder to imagine Australia, far away and serene and perfect. As the days passed, everything beyond Arnold's direct knowledge and observation seemed to grow more and more hazy and indistinct. What once seemed assured as fact was fading slowly to fantasy.

"Why Australia?" Arnold fiddled with his lighter and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it in a swift movement.

"Peaslee and his dad went on an expedition there in '35. We just got through reading the father's journals from that period. They...found something out there in the desert. Some type of written record from...before."

"Before what?"

Cook looked down at his hands on the table, which he had pressed flat to its surface like he was trying to stop them from trembling.

"Before everything." Cook replied, and when their eyes met, Arnold could see it was eating him up inside.

"I think Barnsby mentioned something like that. A library or something."

"At first when I read the PISCES stuff on their 'Talents,' I wanted to laugh. Now I don't know what I want to do. Cry, maybe. It seems they can actually do what they say they can do."

"I believe in Barnsby. Don't know about the others," Arnold stated matter-of-factly, looking at the tip of his cigarette. A haze of smoke hovered in the room, coalescing in a cloud amidst the lights in the ceiling.

"The doctors say he'll be up and around in no time. We're trying to assemble a new team of DELTA GREEN-briefed OSS men, but our people are few and far between. We're sending Dr. Smith with you. He's fluent in the languages and culture of the area. He checks out." Cook shuffled through some of the papers as he spoke, searching, it seemed, for something specific.

"What about the other men on the team that went into France?"

"They're gone. All except Steuben, who stayed behind, and Stillman. But Stillman is in no shape to go."

Arnold and Cook sat in silence for a long time.

“How?” It was all Arnold could say.

“I’ll get you the report. It’s not pretty. PISCES lost two men as well.”

“So what’s the play from here?” Arnold asked and rubbed his cigarette out on the sole of his shoe.

“You’re going to lead a small DG team into the Congo. You’re going to find this Grey city—this Thule, as the Krauts call it, and you’re going to blow it, and everything in it, to hell. That’s the play. Denied to the enemy. Everything we can’t contain, denied to the enemy. Anyone with one of Cornwall’s ‘Talents’ who won’t work for us—denied to the enemy. That’s the policy from now on. Steuben and Peaslee will do the same in Australia.”

Cook pointed at the bottle of Jack Daniels with his eyebrows raised. When Arnold did not reply, the fat man poured himself a large tumbler full of the last of the amber liquid. He downed a third of it at a go, finishing the whole thing in less than a minute. Arnold watched him, thinking about the problems ahead of him like a dancer reviewing an unfamiliar series of steps.

“We’re going to need some jungle specialists.”

“We’re already working on it. I’ll have him debriefed by Steuben in Australia on the way over,” Cook coughed back, wheezing. His bloodshot eyes stared forward into space as if drawn there by some breathtaking sight. He leaned back in his chair and sat transfixed. Arnold wondered what it was the man was seeing in his mind’s eye. The ruins in the Congo ablaze? The Third Reich a fading memory? The war over? Arnold somehow didn’t think that was it.

“That’s all we need for now, Tom. We’ll contact you.”

In his own mind’s eye Arnold beheld the edges of something to which all these events were nothing more than the most insignificant occurrence. Cook, he thought, perhaps, saw the same thing.

Arnold left without saying goodbye. The word somehow didn’t do the meeting justice.

CHAPTER 13:
The play becomes clear when all the actors are dead

February 11, 1943: Somewhere near Myitkyina, Burma

Joe Camp was pretty sure he had malaria, although it was hard to tell if it was just the heat. Buried in the midst of rhododendron bushes beneath the humungous vaulted ceiling of evergreen hardwoods and coated in the all-pervading, ever-present Burmese humidity, it was difficult to gauge whether the droplets on his body were sweat or just water vapor. He decided to believe it was just the humidity and shifted his pack further back so he could glance over a mold-wrapped tree stump at what passed for a road in the interior highlands. Anyway, at 115 degrees in the midst of the hot season, what did it really matter if he had a fever?

Camp imagined what would happen if his mother could see him now, if somehow he found himself back in the real world. Chances were, she would just walk right by him without the slightest hint of recognition. He knew what he looked like from his shaving mirror. As time had passed in the highlands, it had become more and more like some magic device. In the magic mirror he had slowly transformed from the short, muscular, well-groomed football player he once was, to a tiny, gaunt skeleton in sweat-stained, muddied fatigues, with wild, sunken, ice-blue eyes and skin the color of red clay, sprinkled with dozens of bug bites. Joe had begun to think of it as his transformation from American into a Burmese local. Soon enough, he guessed, it would be difficult to pick him out of the lineup of his men—at least without looking at his eyes.

Force 101, team 4a—fourteen men, his men, squatted, invisible in the underbrush around him, waiting for the enemy. Joe Camp had spent months in the jungle now for the OSS. The time frame seemed incredible to him whenever he had access to modern amenities. Luckily, his temptations since showing up for duty in Burma were few. The last time he bathed in a tub was in India during a brief layover, before riding into the jungle on a plane which was literally little more than a bundle of well-placed sticks propelled by an engine that belonged on the back of a rowboat. Since then he had been lucky to eat, much less bathe.

Group 4a had stalked the interior highlands with skill, ambushing Japanese patrols and destroying their handiwork in northern Burma with heavy explosives. Camp, unlike the other western officers, enjoyed the company of the native Burmese Kachins, who comprised the majority of his force. The little men fought with a determination and fervor that westerners could not believe (much less match), and their dispositions were almost always sunny. Few understood why. The Kachins had been made an example by the Japanese. Killing the Japanese therefore made them happy, and it interfered little with their religious beliefs.

Camp recalled a story told with utter sincerity by a boy named Aung, who had collected in his brief time as a guerrilla over thirty pairs of Japanese ears; it was the only thing that Kachin culture

considered something of a sport. The boy recalled that when the Japanese had entered the village of Langtau near the Chaukan pass to India, they had nailed every man over twenty to a tree to prevent them from fleeing to join the British forces. The Japanese had made a dreadful mistake. Few besides the Kachins knew the highlands to the northwest so well, and few besides the Kachins in Burma had the courage to fight. If left to their own devices, the Kachins would not have fought at all.

Camp liked the Kachins, but he was secretly happy that the Japanese had crossed the line. The Allies needed all the help they could get in the thinly guarded corridor.

Technically Burma was now a member of the Japanese puppet states which comprised the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In reality, the jungles were overrun with small groups of British, American and Burmese troops, and few places in the north were heavily defended by the Japanese.

In just over six weeks, Camp had picked up the language of the little, happy people who took Japanese ears for sport. Joe spoke eight languages—mostly those of the Far East and a smattering of Romance tongues. It was what his mother had called his "gift." A natural propensity for language brought him to Harvard and then to the OSS, and from there it was just a brief jump to the middle of a jungle in Burma.

If mother could only see what his "gift" had gotten him, and where.

The Kachins called him "Father" in their tongue now, and followed him around like he was Christ off the cross. Not only because he was the only white man to speak their language in Force 101, but because he had secured them a shipment of pump action shotguns from Remington (at his family's expense). Joe preferred his Thompson submachine gun, but the little Kachins would have nothing to do with such technology. Joe once asked why and found the answer as eccentric and insightful as the Kachins were themselves:

"A shotgun is like a machine gun, but all the bullets fire at once. The machine gun is too slow."

Now Joe Camp sat his rapidly numbing ass on the wet ground, leaning against his pack, watching the path for enemy movement. A report had bled out of Myitkyina that troops burdened with supplies would be heading towards a small Japanese camp on the western slopes of a mountain the Kachins called Loi Leng. From this camp, routine patrols would circulate around the Chaukan Pass intercepting commando groups sneaking over the border from India.

4a had been in place for more than eleven hours and Joe Camp's fevered mind was working the problems of the ambush over in his head again and again, not really to solve them (they had already been solved) but as a way to kill time. Camp scratched his face and suddenly removed a small, red-brown snake from his bootstraps, throwing it away into the underbrush with a disgusted look. Usually, only the bigger snakes tended to be poisonous, but he really had very little knowledge about the local wildlife. Looking up at the dim light which filtered through the canopy, he was distinctly aware that he was a long way from Harvard. If his fraternity brothers could only see him now. Kappa Nu, tried and true...

At that moment Keta, a lead sentry to the northeast, emitted a shrill cry, imitating a local bird. Camp heard the stealthy clicks of safeties being switched off from shotguns, and two tiny sounds across from him told him that Pagou had armed the mines which were placed along the path well clear of their position. Then, suddenly, as Camp cocked his submachine gun, a low whistle sounded from Keta, a signal Camp had not expected. It meant that whoever was coming up the path, they were not Japanese. The Kachins, ever mindful of his commands, stayed still. Joe Camp wiped the sweat out of his eyes and waited for what seemed like a long time.

The first man to come over the rise was even smaller than the Kachins, not more than four feet tall. His skin was painted with a black, crumbly paint in odd patterns, including two lines beneath his glinty eyes which put Joe in mind of football season. The little man's skin was a deep, rich red-brown and his black hair was shaved at his temples and elaborately tied in strands at the top, with knotted ponytails hanging at his back. Other than a loincloth made of gaur skin he wore nothing except his smile. The smile, though, was quite disturbing. Glinty, bright white sharpened teeth shone from the darkness of his face as he moved briskly up the path, humming some repetitive tune to himself. If he saw any of the men of 4a, he made no indication. Then he was gone. Camp sprang up on numb legs and shot across the path to Pagou, who he found clutching a detonator in one hand and his shotgun in the other. They conversed briefly in Kachin whispers.

"What tribe?" Camp asked.

"Tachoan, very bad. Bad people."

"Do they cooperate with the Japanese?"

Pagou shook his head gravely.

"Do they kill the Japanese?"

Pagou nodded.

"So why are they bad?"

"They kill everybody."

"What?"

"They are airung."

"I don't know that word."

"Eaters. Dead eaters."

"Cannibals?" Camp asked in English.

“I don’t know that word,” Pagou said with a smile.

Another bird whistle from Keta, followed by the noise of many people approaching.

“I’m going to talk to them. If anything happens, let ‘em have it.”

Pagou shook his head as if Joe Camp didn’t understand a thing about it and nodded sadly.

“Sure thing, Father.”

Camp sidled out into the path, a Thompson slung on his shoulder and a .45 shoved in his belt strap, which had been tied like a rope around the waist of a scarecrow. Camp wiped his hand across his face and pushed his thinning blond hair back in the same motion, slicking it down with sweat. From the darkness of the bushes he could see the brown orbs of Pagou’s eyes watching him.

A group of about twenty of the little Tachoans came over the hill, all smiling. Camp watched as two of the tribesmen, seeing him, separated themselves from their group and moved towards him with their empty hands raised.

“Hiya,” one said cheerfully, showing shark-like, perfectly white teeth. The other, older one remained silent.

“Hello,” Joe Camp said in English, suddenly on guard for no reason he could place.

“That a nice gun there, misser,” the young one, painted with black and red stripes, said cheerfully.

“Yes.”

“You British man?” The Tachoan’s thick, black eyebrows rose over comically large eyes as he considered Camp.

“No. American,” Camp answered, looking at the group of Tachoans gathered at the crest of the hill on the path behind the two leaders. Apparently they had been hunting. A litter carried between two men bore a heavy load covered in some type of billowy, white material.

The young Tachoan man conversed with the older man in a pidgin Camp could not understand except for the word “American.” The old Tachoan mumbled something to Camp, which the younger one readily translated.

“He say you bring guns and we kill invaders for you.”

“That can be arranged.”

“I do not know this word.”

“I can do that,” Camp reiterated.

“This is good,” the young man said, and smiled wider, like the Cheshire cat. Camp waited for him to disappear into his grin. It wouldn’t have surprised him.

Camp spoke carefully. “I need to know you are enemies of the Japanese before I can give you guns.”

“Oh. We are big enemies. We olompai tarpu-sentei. We nashu cthulhu-sentei.”

Camp’s mind raced over his lexicon of Burmese words and came up with a few matches to the Tachoans’ strange sentence. “Cthulhu” was a word completely unknown to him. From what he could understand from the other words, the little Tachoan man had probably said something like, “We eat the (foreign) man. We are the sons of the (some name, probably of a local deity)”.

“I must know this before I give you guns—“ Camp began to explain, and was cut off by the young and older Tachoans conversing rapidly in pidgin.

“He say we show you,” the little Tachoan laughed.

With a whistle from the older Tachoan, the litter bearers trotted forward in well-practiced lockstep. As they approached, something dropped in Camp’s gut as he realized the white cloth covering the load on the litter, which was stained with blood, was the shredded remains of a parachute. Nothing was parachuted into Burma except Allied equipment...and troops. Camp unslung his submachine gun and held it ready, but pointed at the ground as the little smiling men pulled back the silk.

Four gutted, naked Japanese bodies were stacked one on top of the other like butchered hogs, tied to a single bearing pole of mahagony, their arms and legs twisted and near white to accommodate their dead weight, and their hands were tied so tightly to the pole that the skin there had split. Their innards had been removed with a hunter’s efficiency and their legs were covered in black stains as if they had been standing when the butcher had gone to work. The faces of the dead stared in goggle-eyed amazement at the canopied sky, their heads thrown back as if in a religious ecstasy. Camp tried to keep his expression clear. Although he had killed many Japanese and had studied many seemingly backwards cultures, he had never seen anything like this before. He tried to swallow, forgot how, and struggled to clear his throat as his eyes attempted to maintain a steady, emotionless stare.

Despite the corpses abuzz with flies, and the smell, the little Tachoans continued to smile and laugh in their strange guttural language. As Camp watched a Tachoan child wandered up to the litter and picked a chunk of dried blood from one of the dead man’s ears. The tiny child grinned and placed the morsel in his mouth like he was savoring a fine candy.

“We will find you later. We will send you guns,” Camp said, his mouth numb, watching the child chew its treat.

The two leaders smiled and nodded to themselves.

“If you find men like me in the jungle, what will you do?” Camp asked, trying to figure out if the parachute that covered their kill was for equipment or for a man. Something told him the little Tachoans were dangerously clever.

“We will bring them to the pass at Chaukan,” the young Tachoan said somberly.

“You will not eat them? No olompi sentei?”

The young Tachoan laughed loud and long in response to Camp’s clumsy use of his language. The older Tachoan leaned in and conferred with him for a moment in their pidgin and then he too started laughing.

“You think we eat the white man?” the younger Tachoan finally said, smiling.

“You don’t?”

“You too skinny. Always sick... No good meat.” The younger Tachoan sucked in his cheeks in a mockery of Camp’s malarial look and turned to his people, who seeing his odd expression, laughed, revealing shaved, razor teeth. The little people laughed around him for a long time.

“We will find you,” Joe Camp mumbled and stepped back as the procession moved forward again. At the back of the group four Tachoan boys struggled under the weight of three recently bloodied Japanese Arisaka bolt-action rifles each, slung over their thin shoulders. As they passed, Camp could smell the wafting odor of gunpowder from the recently fired weapons.

Two of the boys (smiling, always smiling) were wearing officers’ caps from the 55th Division of the Japanese army, and the belts slung at their shoulders held insignia markings of the 5th Regimental Mountain Group. This was the division and regiment that Joe Camp and his commandos had been lying in wait for all night.

As the last of the Tachoan’s crested the hill, the Kachin’s of 4a stood up from the underbrush. Pagou looked over at Camp and said, “What now, Father?”

But Joe Camp wasn’t paying attention. He was looking away in the direction the Tachoans had taken up the road, eyes focused on some distant point. The Tachoan’s laughter continued to float back to him through the forest. They seemed endlessly amused at Joe Camp’s sense of humanity.

They had been traveling now for more than an hour and had three more to go. After the meeting with the Tachoans, 4a had packed up its gear and headed northwest along the ragged path in the opposite direction of the little savages. Since the 5th Regimental Mountain Group seemed to have been eliminated or at least routed, Camp radioed command at Nazira for new orders. A return message indicated that Camp was to meet with an officer being flown in from India with orders from OSS command. The rendezvous point was a four hour trek through the highland jungle.

Camp was not looking forward to meeting with anyone from OSS command. Those that came into the jungle for a jaunt and thought that they knew the ropes were the worst. The jungle didn't seem that bad to those who had a way out to India or China, hell, a way out to anywhere but Burma. You would think that a well-fed man stepping off a plane from some civilized place would pay some grudging respect to the scarecrow-thin, battle-hardened jungle man, but, still, somehow, the officers from command all expected you to feel a camaraderie with them, and it was very hard to manufacture something like that on the spot.

However, Joe Camp would salute and "yes sir" and "no sir" whoever stepped off that rickety plane from civilization like he was President Roosevelt himself. If Roosevelt was still the president...

Flying into the jungle was relatively common, although Joe had not heard from OSS command for more than two months in that manner. Small airplanes brought Allied officers in and the wounded out. Equipment and troops were usually dropped from the air, but occasionally—not often—small commando groups would bleed over the border into Burma undetected.

4a straddled either side of the path, nearly silent as they crept forward, alert and ready for anything. Camp saw the two Kachins in the lead hunker down suddenly at the crest of a hill and, like dominoes, one by one the rest of 4a sank into the underbrush and disappeared. Camp unslung his Thompson and waited, kneeling behind a cluster of bamboo shafts, watching the road through an opening in the foliage. Only the hat of the Kachin who was covering the man on point was visible. The road was silent except for jungle sounds until Keta, the scout, gave the all-clear.

Camp sidled over the hill with the rest of his men. Below him in a small dip in the road were the remains of the Japanese 5th Regimental Mountain Group. Equipment of Imperial Japanese manufacture lay scattered in rough piles, thrown down by the bearers as the fighting began, no doubt. There was too much of it on the road for any significant number of the 5th to have survived the encounter. Twelve men lay dead in the road in bizarre positions, dressed in light khakis and t-shirts, skin alive with flies, guns gone (taken by the Tachoan boys, Camp thought). Most of the Japanese bodies had contorted to configurations not possible in life. Camp had never seen anything like it before. Some portions of their skin seemed to be severely burned, and certain limbs were twisted so thoroughly that bones appeared to have broken due to muscle contraction alone. The twelve in the road had yet another thing in common: their eyes had been put out.

Those that had died off the road were found laying spread eagle, staring at the sky, still clutching their rifles, as if they had been picked off suddenly by a sniper. No bullet wounds could be found on their maggot-infested bodies. In the end, over forty bodies were found within a half-

mile of the road. The rest, no doubt, had stumbled out into the rainforest hoping to return to their camp alone. Most would not make it.

The men of 4a dutifully policed up ammunition and anything else of value from the remains of the massacre, while Joe Camp sat on a stump lost in thought. Something was nagging at the back of his brain, something important about the Tachoans and the Japanese. Pagou and another Kachin rigged a box containing a fully operational Japanese machine gun for bearing using two thick shafts of bamboo. They would carry it to the airstrip and give it to those who could use it. Watching this, it slowly dawned on Joe Camp. He stood up suddenly.

The Tachoan adults, as far as Camp could recall, had not carried any weapons.

Pagou, as if reading Joe Camp's thoughts shook his head sadly and repeated, almost to himself:

"Very bad, bad people."

The L-1 Vigilant hooked the air like a gull, bouncing forward on the grass of the landing strip as the wind lifted its fragile frame twice before finally letting it go. The tiny, olive drab two-seater's engine sputtered to a halt as it taxied to one side. The smell of gasoline and cooking meat hung in the air of the airfield, which had been hacked from the side of a low rise in the jungle by men toiling for hours with machetes and shovels just the week before. In another two weeks, Camp knew, no evidence of this airfield would remain. The jungle was just that fast.

Camp watched from his meal of assorted B-ration cans, which he had set up in front of him on the grass in some dim approximation of a civilized dinner. As he ate a slice of canned apple, two white men exited the L-1, both in non-descript khakis with little or no insignia (not surprising; it was a guerrilla war after all), talking to one another as they walked towards Camp's men. There were about forty men in the clearing, only fifteen of whom were under Camp's command. The rest were freedom fighters who had gathered here for supplies or news.

One huddled group of native Karens, guns never far from reach, continued to eat their meal of Gaur meat, unmindful of the racket the landing plane had made. Not one man of that group even looked up. Camp's group of Kachins happily chattered away, splitting a meal of cooked gibbon and canned pineapple. Two Chinese soldiers from Chang Kai Shek's non-existent Chinese Expeditionary Force morosely picked at their tin plates full of brown rice, looking lost and out of their league.

Camp stood, wiped his hands on his pants, and walked forward. The larger of the two men waved at Camp and walked over as if he knew him, and Camp puzzled for a moment before retrieving his glasses from his front pocket. It was not until he was within fifteen feet that Camp realized that the man was not only someone from OSS command, he ***was*** OSS command. As far as

Burma went, Major Carl Eifler was as high up on the OSS totem pole as you were likely to get before having to leave the country. With a pug face and the build of a linebacker, the two hundred and fifty pound man dwarfed Joe Camp; together they looked like a before and after advertisement for a Charles Atlas Body Building kit. Camp snapped a startled salute, almost knocking his glasses off his head. Eifler cackled.

"You trying to get me shot, lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Joe replied, wide eyed.

"Donovan's got some plans for you. You're outta here."

"But sir—" Camp began.

"Don't give me any lip, Joe. They need you. You'll get your orders when we get to Nazira."

"But 4a—" Joe glanced over at his men, who were watching the exchange quietly.

"You'll be back shortly. Until then, Captain Wilkinson will be taking over your spot." Eifler pointed back at the other man who had ridden in the plane, a clean shaven, intelligent-looking man with a fine thin build. Ivy League. With his luck, the guy was probably a Yaley, Joe thought.

"Give me a minute with 4a," Camp asked, and seeing the assent in Eifler's eyes gathered his group around him. They all huddled down in front of him like kids at a Boy Scout meeting.

"See that guy?" Camp asked, pointing back at Captain Wilkinson, who was unloading his gear from the tiny cargo space on the Vigilant. The men from 4a nodded in unison, eyes carefully attending the man.

"That's my brother. You must keep him safe. I have to leave for awhile." The Kachins smiled and nodded, happy to know that their leader had a brother.

"You will return?" Pagou asked quietly.

"Yes. Pagou, Keta... I'm counting on you. Don't let him out of your sight. I'll be back."

As Camp loaded his gear on the plane, the Kachins warmly welcomed a rather confused Captain Wilkinson to their ranks.

Camp heard Keta, smiling, quietly tell the rest of the group in Burmese, "We will call him Uncle."

CHAPTER 14:
Are they living still, those friends scattered to the world's ends?

February 21, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Lieutenant Barnsby was released from St. Francis Hospital in the morning, and was met by a car bearing Commander Cook and Lieutenant Thomas Arnold. He haunted the front steps of the hospital, dressed in a black overcoat, jacket and trousers with a black tie, black gloves and black hat. His thin, drawn face hung over his collar, almost blending with the white of his shirt. To Arnold he looked like a corpse come to life to attend its own funeral, but Arnold shook the thought away. The little Brit entered the car unsteadily and sat without saying a word as they drove away toward the docks. Arnold and Cook seemed in a similar mood. They rode in silence.

Barnsby had suffered what the doctors at St. Francis referred to rather guardedly as an "episode." After grasping the notebook of the late Nathaniel Peaslee in his naked hand, Barnsby had remained unconscious for more than twenty hours, then woke suddenly, screaming incoherently about bizarre things. He was moved to St. Francis at the quiet request of the Department of the Army. Nothing was mentioned of his "abilities" or his affiliation with the military. He was sedated for a week and slowly recovered some semblance of his former self. Finally, as his condition improved, he was pronounced sane by the medical staff of St. Francis and was released. After a brief exchange of coded messages using one-time pads, orders from Major Cornwall called Barnsby home. Today he was to board a transport which would take him to England.

At the docks Cook waited in the car as Arnold helped Barnsby load his luggage onto a cart, which sailors would later move onboard the merchant marine ship. The grey sky hung low over the bay and icy water crashed against the pylons, kicking up the rich smell of the sea. As the two men looked out on the ocean, a huge transport ship heading out to sea let out a long, low sonorous hum. As the sound faded, Arnold could see unreasoning fear in Barnsby's eyes. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone.

Somber and pale, Barnsby looked up at Arnold and said very quietly:

"Tom, this is all far more complicated than it seems. Peaslee's vision and this Thule are connected. I just don't know how. Be very careful."

"How could they be connected, Al?"

"Something about the Library. When I touched the book, it was something Peaslee saw in the Library. He knew about the city in the Congo, or the name... I..."

"What do you mean?"

“It’s not very clear. Peaslee read a great deal about the future. I don’t know how. He read about Thule or heard about it or some such thing. He knew about it, and the creature that was in Peaslee knew about it, too. It went to the Jermyn estate to find more about it. It doesn’t make any sense. But it means something.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“I’ll try and get reassigned back to your group, Tom. Trust me, you’ll need me.”

“It’ll be too late then, Al. I’m leaving for Africa tomorrow.”

“Dammit, Tom—“

“Shut up, you. Get on the ship, go home, get married, have some kids.” Arnold tried to sound lighthearted, but the docks and the chill in the air bled all the merriment from his words. He looked around for comfort but all he could see were the boarding crewmen with faces clenched like fists, the drab posters asking people to buy war bonds, and a million different inanimate things which screamed of conflict.

Why can’t death be like this, Arnold thought. A place you go when it is time, with civility and comfort and a feeling of completion, like a trip from which you never come back. Instead life ended in the rending of flesh, in the consumption of every bit of effort contained within a form. Arnold’s men, the men who had raided the Cap de la Hague camp, were gone now, all but Steuben, and that seemed unreal to him. They had not said goodbye. They had not known they were heading to their deaths. If they had left when he was there, if they had known—maybe he would have felt different. And now Barnsby was gone, too.

“Goodbye, Tom,” Barnsby said, expression empty.

“ Bye, Al,” Thomas Arnold replied.

Alan Barnsby smiled briefly, a smirk really, turned and headed up the gangplank. Arnold watched him disappear into the crowd of men on deck, a black suit among blue uniforms. His hat was the last thing to go, slipping behind a group of men gathered in front of a lifeboat. It rose and fell one last time and then Barnsby was gone.

Arnold jumped into the army staff car. As it began to slide away from the curb, Cook glanced up from his endless paperwork with a questioning look in his eyes.

“That takes care of Barnsby,” Arnold said, and didn’t care for the feeling of finality the words gave him.

Arnold retired to his hotel, a dilapidated wreck near Needham on the outskirts of Boston, content to read through the paperwork he hadn't yet covered. He left for the Belgian Congo in the morning. Things were rapidly spiraling out of control. Who knew what the Nazis were up to? Were they even up to anything?

In the fleabag room by the light of a single naked bulb, Arnold read of the catastrophe in France, the second mission, the one he had not been on, the one that had cost the lives of the men he had learned to call his friends. Arnold smoked and drank and read, trying to pull the bits of information together, to restore the separate filaments of thought that had been rent and split by time into a thousand different things. Arnold tried to see the absolute form of what they were chasing, just by considering a few of the fragments.

He read the report on Nathaniel Peaslee's dream journals of another time and place, a report on the 1935 Miskatonic expedition to the Gibson in Australia, an antiseptic examination of the book ***Observations on the Several Parts of Africa,*** but nothing became clear. Instead his mind began to flounder in the face of the ever-growing wall of information. Soon he could not clearly assemble a chain of facts, and instead found his mind wandering, considering pointless, fanciful things. The way the rug lay upon the floor, the lumps in the yellowed plastered ceiling, the hum and click of the radiator.

Thomas Arnold fell asleep in a filthy easy chair and dreamt.

His brother Lucas worked summers at the Aladdin, the tiny movie theater in his home town of Dunsmuir, California, and it seemed in his dream that he was there now, in the back row on a Monday evening after swim practice, the rest of the theater empty. Was Lucas working up there in the booth? Arnold turned, but nothing could be seen past the scalding white eye of the projector. The rest was lost in darkness except for the window of the screen.

On the screen, with their backs to the camera, a black and white hero and his fearless companion trudged through a prop jungle on some Hollywood sound stage. What serial was he watching? ***Tarzan the King? Darkest Africa?*** Arnold could not recall. ***We regret to inform you that your son, Lucas Michael Arnold, was killed on 14 January 42 due to enemy action off the coast of North Africa.*** Lucas was dead, the Aladdin was demolished years ago and the war was raging. He was supposed to be in Africa, he was supposed to—

Who was up there in the dark running the film?

The music swelled, drawing Arnold's attention back to the screen, just as the hero pulled aside a plastic frond to reveal a huge stone block cut into a perfect grey cube. As the music reached its crescendo the black and white hero turned to the camera, his face filled with dread. Although he could not be sure, Thomas Arnold thought the face might be his own.

Then, pulled from the false freedom of sleep at three in the morning—a knock at the door...

CHAPTER 15:
I am part of the Darkness before man

February 21, 1943: Port Hedland, Australia

Joe Camp, sunburned and tired, crawled from the hatch of the PBM-3R flying boat, feeling something akin to relief, or at least delivery from the hands of blind fate, and smiled up into the sun. The plane was one of only four of its type to survive the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, and was called the "Ya Missed Me!" That bright green epigraph was emblazoned on the nose along with Bugs Bunny sunnily raspberrying the world, ducking a barrage of cartoon bullet holes. Despite its former luck, he didn't care to test the aircraft's fortune any further than he had to. Joe Camp believed luck was at best a dwindling commodity. Something about the plane's upbeat name implied eventual disaster to him.

While airborne in the comfortable cabin of the Navy Transport Service flying boat, Camp could not shake the sensation that any moment the craft would come under Japanese aerial assault, a circumstance in which he could offer the crew no assistance. Being in terrible danger didn't frighten him; it was the helplessness that got to him and ate at his nerves. The flight was the longest twenty hours he had ever spent. Despite the relative luxury of the aircraft—they even served him a Coca Cola with ice in it, for God's sake!—it felt like he was flying about in his own, immense coffin. He found, with some wry amusement as he suffered through the luxuries of the Navy Transport, that he missed the reassuring sounds of the Burmese highlands.

The plane had landed twice in the midst of the endless ocean to refuel with the assistance of American Navy vessels, a process which left the crew as stricken by helplessness and frustration as Camp felt when they were airborne, feelings he could see stamped across faces that usually held the omniscient and limitless gaze known only to pilots. The crew of seven, all naval aviators, had treated Camp well, despite his Army credentials, and had even invited him up front to the radio room to play some cards to pass the time, an invitation he accepted more to please the Navy men than to distract himself.

Now on the far side of his journey, and at the beginning of a new one, Joe Camp stepped out into the sweltering heat and the fresh salt air of the docks as the crew debarked from the huge aircraft to Port Hedland. Out in the bay, spread out before him, lay a serene image of dozens of huge naval vessels, anchored and still on the crystal blue waves. Behind him was Port Hedland itself, a conglomeration of British-style houses smack in the middle of an exotic locale rich with native vegetation. The contrast looked somehow fantastic, although he had spent the last few months of his life in a jungle even more fantastic.

The knot of people at the end of the docks sorted gear and headed up to the shore, Camp lost among them. Past a series of wrought iron gates, Camp found himself in the midst of hundreds of

Australian, British, and American soldiers moving and stacking boxes of supplies in various, apparently meaningful piles, each box stamped with its final destination in red ink. Camp found himself constantly jumping out of the way of the overburdened troops, to shouts of "Make way!" and"All right!" The Navy pilots, their mission done, rapidly disappeared into the crowd, leaving Camp in all the confusion and noise to fend for himself.

Camp, standing in his recently acquired civilian clothes, looked out of place among the enlisted men. The only thing that marked him as a military man was the drab green rucksack slung over his bony shoulder. He flipped his thick, black glasses out of a small case and placed them on his broad face, glancing around for his contact, an OSS lieutenant named Mark Steuben. His orders at Nazira informed him he would finally be briefed here by Steuben on the reasons he was recruited for the OSS in the first place—some psychological warfare unit called DELTA GREEN, which he never got the chance to investigate before he shipped out to the 101 in Burma. Joe knew the group, DELTA GREEN, had something to do with anthropology—that and his affinity for languages were the reasons he was recruited. After training at Camp X in Canada, instead of riding a desk for DELTA GREEN Camp was off to fill some holes in the line-up of the 101.

Camp shifted the pack to his right shoulder and his .45 dug uncomfortably into his back. When he looked up from readjusting his weapon in his belt, Joe saw the man coming towards him from the street which ran adjacent to the docks.

Tall and thin, he looked like some sort of religious type to Camp. Despite the scorching heat, the man wore a full suit, tie and all. It was the clothes mostly that identified him as an OSS man to Camp; the group's propensity for often very expensive civilian garb had gained them the nickname "Oh So Social" from the other branches of the armed forces.

As he approached, Camp made out the stern set of his gaunt face, and the deep-socketed green eyes which stared back at him serenely. It was obvious now that the man was heading directly for him.

"What's the time in Tokyo?" the man uttered in a flat voice, looking over Camp's shoulder. His accent was cultured, vaguely British, like a Yaley.

"No time like the present," Joe replied, finishing the code.

"Mark Steuben," the thin man muttered.

"Joe Camp."

"This way." No niceties, no small talk. The man turned and hurried towards a run-down looking 1930s Packard parked up on the curb near the entrances to the docks. Camp had to double time it to catch up.

"Get in." Steuben climbed laboriously into the car, which was covered in a fine, seemingly permanent layer of reddish dust, and started it with a roar of the engine. Camp threw his pack in

and jumped in after it, shutting the door as they sped away.

"So what's the news? You're going to brief me here? When do I leave?" Camp shouted over the engine.

Steuben never looked up but shouted: "Change of plans. You're staying here."

"Oh?" Camp raised his eyebrows in surprise. Beautiful, perfectly painted houses zipped by on either side of the road, flashing past too quickly to be appreciated. Camp glanced into the rear-view mirror. His eyes settled on a second, similar car, which puttered along at the same pace, matching their turns. Something cold crept down Camp's back and he found his eyes drawn to Steuben's face, which was rigid with intensity. A rivulet of sweat dripped down the man's cheek and over his thin, trembling lips. Camp could not be sure if the trembling was from the engine of the car or something more, some unspoken fear.

The road widened out into a cobblestone avenue, and the spacing of the houses grew until each building was isolated by great gaps of grass-covered hills. This was all wrong.

"So," Camp stated, trying to break the tension by hiding his own.

"So," Steuben repeated back, "...we're here." The car came to a rough stop with a screech of brakes. The apartment building was finely constructed but was in disrepair, and the street in front of it was empty of foot traffic. The building's only sign of habitation were fly-covered piles of garbage stacked in the gutter. Camp could see no curtains in any of the numerous broken windows. Anything or anybody at all could be stashed in there.

As Steuben stepped out of the car and out of view, Camp rapidly shifted his .45 around to his front left hip in his beltline. Suddenly, just a second after his adjustment was done, Steuben's head appeared in the window. Camp froze.

"Coming?" Steuben asked, confused, and then walked away towards the tenement without looking back.

Joe Camp got out of the car. He left his bag in it. Something told him he would need all the maneuverability that he had to make it through what was coming. Steuben waited at the double doors of the tenement, which hung open, unlit like a cave. Joe trotted across the street to meet him.

"Okay," Camp said to himself as he climbed the steps, preparing for—what? He didn't know. When he met Steuben's empty gaze, he forced himself to smile. Camp cast one last glance back as they entered the building and saw the other car, the one that had followed them, parked across the street forty feet behind Steuben's. A dark-skinned man sat behind the wheel of the still idling vehicle, staring at Camp and Steuben with glinty, white eyes. Joe could not be sure, but he thought he saw others in the back seat of the second Packard.

Then he was inside the dark, cool building, following Steuben up a flight of squeaky wood

stairs. Behind Steuben on the stairs, out of view, Camp practiced a reach for his pistol to make sure it would come free of his belt easily, and then slid it back in place, pulling his jacket in front of it. Somehow Joe's senses were in overdrive, and every nook and cranny jumped out at him as they climbed, every nuance of the rotting wood. Every shadow leapt out at him, insisting itself upon his consciousness, like it was the last time he would ever see anything like it. Like it was the last time he would see anything at all.

Sadly, like a man heading towards the gallows, Joe Camp climbed the stairs, wondering vainly if he would ever leave the building alive.

CHAPTER 16:
The powers of Nature all about me lay revealed

February 24, 1943: Needham, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

At three in the morning, outside a dilapidated hotel on the outskirts of Boston, in the midst of a snow storm, a small boy stood solemnly outside Thomas Arnold's door. Arnold's first instinct after opening the door was to look beyond the child for his parents or something which would indicate the boy's origin, but all he saw past the semi-circle of the parking lights was a copse of naked, dead trees pelted by a sheet of falling snow. Behind the child the lot was empty, and the night was cold. Arnold looked down at the kid, then down at the .45 in his own hand. Something told him to keep it out anyway. The child showed no fear, nor any other emotion for that matter. The kid considered Arnold and the gun with equal and wholly alien indifference.

The kid's pale face was framed by perfectly combed, greased-down hair that was parted with an antiseptic precision which made Arnold flinch. The boy wore a complete set of black clothing, finely tailored for his tiny frame—so perfectly that Arnold thought for a moment he had opened the door to a well-dressed midget; but no, the kid's face was blemishless and wrinkle-free. Arnold guessed he couldn't be much older than eight, but something about his eyes (which never seemed to blink) and the stern set of his features told Arnold something was not right. In fact, something about the child was terribly wrong. The feeling he had gotten on the beach at the Cap de la Hague poured over him again, leaving him numb and lost. Somehow, his mind was telling him that he was in the presence of something greater than human experience.

The kid stood as still as a statue, pale, emotionless, clutching a small box-camera at the threshold of the door while the heat rapidly bled out of the room.

Seconds ticked by and snow gathered.

"Come in," Arnold finally said, thinking of deals with the devil. Things like this did not happen to normal people, he was thinking. Normal lives did not involve meetings like this, he was thinking, but the kid and the circumstances remained, defying reason and order without explanation.

The boy entered, walking with almost comical efficiency to the exact center of the room. Turning on his tiny heel, the kid considered Arnold like a player would consider a chess piece, then placed his small box-camera down on the dresser and simply waited. Now, in the light, Arnold saw that the camera was not quite a camera, but an odd assortment of parts in a camera case, with a green filigreed lens like the bottom of a cola bottle. The device looked more utilitarian that a bunch of junk. It looked like it had been fashioned carefully and with great purpose.

Arnold shut the door to the winter wind, turned up the heat on the old radiator and put his jacket back on, slowly, while considering the kid. He looked like shit, he supposed, sweat stains and ragged red beard, but he didn't think that mattered to his guest. Arnold sat carefully back down in the filthy easy chair and propped his feet up on the bed. The gun never left his hand and his eyes never left the child. All the while the kid stared back like a still life, his eyes empty and flat like a painting.

"What do you want?" Arnold asked. Something terrible flickered in the child's eyes. It was a look of intense concentration barely hidden behind a wall of bland passivity.

"I have come to explain things to you," the child said. His sprightly voice sounded like a series of recorded statements strung together to form a whole sentence. Something about the cadence, the way the sentence did not rise and fall naturally, put Arnold in mind of animals trained to speak for human amusement. This is the way the dead would sound if they could talk, Arnold thought to himself and shuddered.

"About...?"

"Time," the thing in the boy's body said, pronouncing the word with the conviction of one who had great experience with the subject at hand.

It took Arnold a moment to place why the child seemed so odd, so different from other children. He, it, stayed completely still, its arms uncomfortably at its sides, its back perfectly straight, its eyes unblinking and distant.

Arnold's voice came out of his mouth like something had pulled the words out of him. Only after uttering them did Arnold realize he had said something:

"You're from the library... You're like the thing that was in Peaslee."

"Yes."

"Shit." Arnold had the urge to pick up the phone and call Cook, but something told him that if he tried, he would find out what the box-camera which was not a box-camera could do. The boy unfolded his hands in an exacting imitation of a human gesture of calm composure, but the emulation ended there. Nothing of the emotion bled through the child's flat voice as it spoke what sounded like a carefully prepared statement.

"We share mutual goals. My species wishes to study and maintain those species which exist in the interim which comes between our first age on your world and our second age. We travel to your time to study your culture, and to correct...flaws in the chain of events you call history. We mean humanity no harm."

"Flaws," Arnold repeated.

"Yes. Fractures. Mistakes which arise. One such mistake exists in a human body now. This being is one of my kind. It seeks to destroy humanity. You will know it as Dr. Smith."

"Dr. Smith?"

"Yes. You have not met it yet, but it is to accompany you on your voyage to Africa. It is the same being which inhabited Nathaniel Peaslee, and which has now moved into another human shell. We are hunting it. It must be stopped. It seeks the destruction of the place you know as Thule. This will cause numerous events to occur which will bring about the demise of your race, the breakdown of the natural causality of time, and the elimination of the future in which we will exist." The last word echoed in the cheap room. Exist. ***We will exist,*** Arnold thought. Oh my God. Will exist. The future spoken of like a carpenter speaks of a house not yet completed—a room will be placed here, the stairs will be there... Jesus.

Outside the wind whipped, whistling around the eaves of the roof of the bungalow. Beyond this room, Arnold wanly hoped, the real world continued to exist. It was difficult to tell from the vantage point of the easy chair.

"How did you find me?" Arnold blurted out. It was the first thing to occur to him, and it sounded foolish as it left his mouth.

"Wingate Peaslee was questioned at length in Pnakotus, the library you speak of, 150 million years before now. He gave us your name, and the names of others in your group. Through certain other facts which were gleaned by our agents in your historical records, we were able to find you particularly, amidst your species, in time. We had millennia to do so."

"Peaslee's in Australia."

"That is where the exchange took place."

"When? How?" Arnold balked, fear rising in his voice. They could get anybody, it seemed. Anyone at all.

"We had knowledge that Wingate Peaslee would return there in this year. Our agents were waiting for him. He has been returned to this time unharmed."

"So what now? I know where Smith is, or I guess I can find him. He's posing as an expert in African history."

"We wish to remove it from this time without disturbing the order of things."

"How?"

"It must be permitted to proceed to the point where its plan is almost realized. Then it may be safely eliminated. Fewer secondary events will occur, the closer it is to its plan's completion."

Arnold scratched his head, a movement that grounded him once more in reality—he was talking to an eight-year-old about the nature of time at three in the morning in the middle of a snow storm. All the evidence available indicated that the thing in the kid was born in another, alien form, at least 150 million years before. Arnold swallowed and cleared his throat. It seemed too small an opening to breathe through, all of a sudden.

"Secondary events?" he croaked.

"This is unimportant."

"No, no, explain it...please." Arnold found himself spellbound by the creature inside the boy's body. There was something obscene about gaining such knowledge so readily, and Arnold could feel it settling into his mind like a thick, foul secretion. It felt wrong, but the draw of ultimate truth was undeniable. The child continued as if reciting from a textbook:

"The elimination of a disruption from the chain of causality causes numerous unforeseen secondary events which often prove to be even more difficult to eliminate than the original threat. The closer to an actual crux event a correction is made, the fewer secondary events occur. If Smith is eliminated now, so far from the crux event, there could be unfortunate aftereffects."

Arnold rubbed his eyes briskly and stood up, then immediately sat back down as his head swam. The walls of the room seemed to close in. He could not be sure but the light seemed to flicker.

"And the crux event is the destruction of this... Thule?" his voice said from far away.

"Yes."

"And you want me to eliminate him there?"

"Eliminate it there. Yes." It indicated the box-camera. "This is a weapon which will eliminate its consciousness when the time is right. It has been disguised as a human device, a camera, so it may escape Smith's detection." The child-thing lifted the box-camera from the dresser with concise movements and handed it to Arnold, who forced himself to take it. Arnold's first response to the boy coming towards him was to leap up from the easy chair and back away, but he held his ground and composure—barely.

The box was light as a feather, and Arnold could see tiny looping arcs of bronze wire strung inside the black wood frame, connecting an amazing array of tiny green sheets of glass which were cut into complex assortments of squares, triangles and circles.

"Use it only when you arrive at Thule with Smith."

"How does it...work?" Arnold stood, carefully considering the box in his hands.

“Depress the red button to make it...work.”

Arnold flipped the box over and saw a small, plain, red button embedded in a rough hole punched through the wood casing.

“But only when Smith is at Thule. It is most important that the device is not activated before then, for any reason. Do not speak of this meeting to others or you may inadvertently destroy your species.”

“Yes. All right. I got it. Yes.” Arnold found he was close to tears, for no reason he could place.

The child turned suddenly, causing Arnold to jump backwards towards the bed. The boy opened the door carefully, with precise movements, like a musician playing a well-rehearsed piece of music. An arctic wind poured in, rich with snow, and the small boy trudged out into the night without shutting the door.

“Wait!” Arnold shouted after him, rushing to the open door, nose and ears stinging in the harsh wind.

Halfway across the parking lot, illuminated beneath the yellow lamps in an empty snow field, the boy looked like a shadow come to life as he turned. The boy’s eyes were nothing more than black pits of shadow, and the sheets of snow falling gave the scene a crazed tilting feel, as if the entire area were rushing about on some huge, unseen machine. Arnold felt himself go light-headed again.

“What’s in Thule?” Arnold shouted out into the wind.

“Chaos,” the child replied through the falling snow, his voice hoarse with effort. He, it, turned again and disappeared into the storm.

When Arnold shut the door again the silence of the room enveloped him, but only for a second. The calm was broken by a pounding on the wall above the bed. The banging shook the cheap wall and sent a yellowed photograph of the New York City skyline crashing to the floor in an explosion of glass. A muffled voice shouted profanities at him through the thin wood, a reprimand brought on by too much alcohol or too little sleep. Apparently his neighbor had had enough of Arnold’s three A.M. conversation.

So, Arnold thought to himself, the real world is still there after all. Looking down at the alien device in his hands, he tried not to wonder how much longer the world as he knew it might last.

CHAPTER 17:
I, for this, have been committed

February 24, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Thomas Arnold loaded his gear onto the PBY2 Coronado, head bent down to keep the freezing, salt-laden wind from tearing into his face. Past the huge flying boat the uninviting waters of Boston harbor were laden with chunks of ice and rich white caps of rolling waves. A Navy officer from the Naval Air Transport Service, bundled in a pea coat, stepped down the gangplank and offered to move the rest of Arnold's equipment aboard. He smiled and joked and laughed despite the cold, all of which was lost on Arnold, whose eyes were far away. Frozen, he watched as the little man efficiently moved his gear into the storage bay beneath the wing.

"Can I take that for you, sir?" the man was saying to him, for the second time. He pointed at the box Arnold clutched in both hands.

"No," Arnold replied, finally, and walked up the gangplank. Behind him, the Navy man began to whistle a tune. Three little fishes.

Arnold settled into his chair in the back of the Coronado, in a small portion of the aircraft which had been fitted for passengers, and tried to relax. He checked the small black box on his lap, checked the tape he had carefully sealed over the red button. He lifted the lid and looked at the innards for—what? It seemed all right to him, for all he knew.

"Excuse me." A gruff voice, next to Arnold's left ear made him sit bolt upright. He shut the box quickly.

Arnold turned in his seat and found himself looking at a disheveled man in his late forties. The man's brown hair, frizzed and dirty, had faded to grey at the edges and his untrimmed beard was sprinkled with white patches. His clothes were a mish-mash of unrelated styles and his breath and body odor were foul. He wore an odd satchel of woven wool around his shoulders, which hung at his waist like a small hammock. Inside it, Arnold could see, were a cluster of books. The late Dr. Peaslee had described such satchels in his account of the library at Pnakotus.

"Yeah?" Arnold said, affecting an air of indifference, but he knew already this was Dr. Smith. There was no moment of realization or conclusion for Arnold, just the sure knowledge that what was speaking to him was not human. He found with some fear that the feeling of talking to something other than human was becoming a commonplace thing.

"I am Dr. Smith and you are Thomas Arnold," it said, plainly, and pushed its way into the adjacent seat across the aisle. Certainly, it was much more skilled at human mimicry than the thing

that Arnold had met the night before. But even so, something about the way it sat, completely upright, and the way it simply stared at Arnold, blandly, without blinking, would seem out of place to even the most common person.

"Yeah." It was all that Arnold could say.

"I have extensive knowledge of the region to which we are journeying," it stated.

"Good."

The door to their small bulkhead shot open with a bang and Arnold jumped, almost dropping the box from his lap. The Navy Air Transport Service man smiled into their nearly empty cabin.

"Guess you guys get the first-class treatment," he said. "We're closing up the plane, and we'll be off in about twenty five minutes." The little man shut the door again behind him, and when Arnold turned to look back at Smith—at it—he found it considering him quietly, as if it had been watching him the whole time, studying his reactions.

Arnold quickly looked away. It seemed whatever he did, he incriminated himself. Arnold studied the box on his lap for a moment before tearing his eyes away from it. Instead he looked out the window, away from Smith.

"What is that, please?" Smith asked, and Arnold's heart jumped in his chest. Everything seemed muffled beneath the insistent pounding of his heart in his ears. What if it recognized the weapon? Should Arnold trigger the device here and hope for the best? He looked into the eyes of the devil across the aisle and calmly lifted the box. Arnold placed the box carefully on the seat next to him, the one away from Smith, underneath the window. Outside the porthole-like window, sailors were casting off moorings and two of the four engines of the immense plane leapt life belching a thick, grey smoke.

"My camera," Arnold said quietly, looking back into Smith's empty eyes.

"Yes. A chemical emulsion camera." Smith looked away, straight ahead.

Arnold settled in, he placed his jacket over the"camera," pulled his hat down over his eyes and feigned sleep so he would not have to talk to it any longer. Something in his mind begged for rest, for escape from the thing on the plane beside him, but Arnold knew that what he had set about doing must be done. This was about the world. The whole world.

He could feel Smith's eyes crawling over his body as he reclined in the chair. Every nerve in his body remained ready to spring at any moment, and he tried his best to drift off, but sleep would not come. Again and again he heard the voice of the little boy shout back from the snow storm, and saw the form disappear into the night, a shadow moving among shadows, like a specter foretelling imminent death.

It would be a long flight.

INTERLUDE 4:
The enemy's in view; draw up your powers

February 24, 1943: In transit, Boston, U.S.A. to Matadi, Belgian Congo

How could it thank the humans who had allowed its plans to come to fruition? The creature called John Smith had never before known the sensation which now moved its shell towards irrational reactions. Sitting within the ridiculously primitive flying craft in the midst of the journey to the...end of everything, Smith was overcome with—what? Smith had read of it in human texts before...gratitude? Thankfulness? It was an unusual sensation. Those who had inadvertantly helped it, and who would suffer at Smith's hands (or at least his intentions) suddenly seemed...to deserve Smith's protection? But why? The shell would give no answers.

The feeling remained.

Smith wiped away the liquid from its face and considered the portal. They moved forward in utter blackness. Since their course correction and refueling in the Bahamas, they had set out across the sea into the night. This was what the human mind saw of time, Smith knew; a black future, a constant repetitive now, a clear past. How could a creature with such limited faculties be worth Smith's pity?

Still the sensation remained.

This would not stop its plan, however. A plan for which it had suffered through thirty-six linear years of this most primitive time, suffered the inanities and foolishness of the natives, and worse suffered their form and feelings. Smith would gladly remove the ward from the Congo, but it seemed now it would not have to. Others would end the world in Smith's stead and it would watch with a sensation of pride, one of the few feelings it had grown to accept and enjoy.

It was truly the stolid members of the council of Pnakotus, of Smith's own race which provided the answers to its problems. Smith's plan had run without flaw until the winter of 1938, when in the course of its studies Smith noted the ever growing human conflict in both Asia and Europe. This was an unforeseen occurrence. All the texts of the great library of Pnakotus which Smith had consumed about what the humans called the twentieth century indicated that the second great human conflict would not occur until the summer of 1941. Suddenly, and without indication, Smith's time for study of the ward at Thule was up, but much more to uncover still remained. Smith could not leave for the Congo, even while travel within the zone of conflict was still possible, if it could not lift the ward when it arrived there.

Instead it waited and studied. It studied the hundreds of books it had removed from the ruins of

the once-grand library of Pnakotus in the desert of Australia. With human assistance Smith removed hundreds of the odd books to Darwin, Australia, and had set about cataloging and studying them during the 1930s. Before Smith's departure from the library it had released a single member of the not wholly material race which had come after Smith's own, the Great Race's ultimate enemy, utilizing the methods found in the restricted texts to guard the treasure of the books. This trap remained for any who might trespass. Not unlike the trap it had left for its pursuers in Bary, Massachusetts.

Smith pored through hundreds of these restricted books throughout the 1930s. Although Smith found some startling things in them, some were mundane and juvenile native studies of individuals throughout the Earth's existence. Several were completely blank, but this in itself was not unusual; often the Great Race stored blank tomes along with completed ones on the shelves for future use.

Amidst these mundane texts was one book which was startling to Smith. It outlined the mechanically induced recollections of none other than Wingate Peaslee, the offspring of the human shell Smith had once occupied. Wingate had been snatched from the year 1943 by agents of the Motion and questioned at length about Smith's actions by the council of Pnakotus, 150 million years before, about which he knew next to nothing. However, the text revealed a human group, of which Wingate Peaslee was a member, who were pursuing the Thule ward with the same ire and intention as Smith! Smith would not have to destroy the ward. The humans would accomplish this action for it.

Since its discovery of the Wingate Peaslee narrative from Pnakotus in 1932, Smith had decided to insert himself amidst that human group when the time came right. Thanks to the council's careful bookkeeping, it had names, dates, and locations to do it. Smith spent a tiny portion of the interim years studying Africa, the human native languages there, and all aspects of its cultures. In late 1939 it returned to the United States and cultivated a job at the university it had become familiar with for a brief time in the guise of Professor Nathaniel Peaslee—Miskatonic. As Dr. John Smith it joined the faculty well ahead of the arrival of the human agents, so no suspicion would be aroused. It waited at Miskatonic, a place with which it knew the Peaslees were well associated, for the events it knew would unfold. The human group, DELTA GREEN, would meet Wingate Peaslee there on January 28, 1943, and by then Smith would already be in place to provide the answers they sought.

As planned, it was brought into the human group, DELTA GREEN on February 3, 1943, by a human leader named Cook when the rather trite book that Smith itself had (in the shell of Nathaniel Peaslee) collected in 1912— ***Observations on the Several Parts of Africa***—was returned to it for study due to its expertise in native African cultures. What did the book mean? The human wanted to know, and so Smith told them, already knowing the outcome of the human's decision.

The ward would be destroyed by human hands, and Smith would watch and...smile?

But still, at the back of its adoptive brain, discontent.

PART THREE:
The sky is darkened as I descend the stair

CHAPTER 18:
And in trust itself, the greatest trap

February 21, 1943: Port Hedland, Australia

Joe Camp knew it was coming when Steuben stopped climbing the stairs. The ambush, the trap, something—it would come here, on the third floor, amidst the rotting wood and flaking plaster of the derelict building. Steuben, or the man who pretended to be Steuben, watched Camp walk the length of the decaying, third-story hallway with dead eyes. Camp walked slowly, with a feigned ease, ready at any moment to burst into all-consuming movement. Steuben pushed a door next to him without a lock or handle open and gestured for Camp to enter the darkened abyss beyond. The gesture seemed random, as if the man had just thought of it a second before to slice through the very palpable air of distrust which had unexpectedly congealed around them. Camp's ears, attuned to the minutiae of the jungle, easily picked out the stealthy sounds of a door carefully being shut far down below, of footsteps rising rapidly but quietly up the creaky stairs, of motion in a room further along past Steuben. The awkward moment remained static for a improbably long time. Then, as something ticked over in his mind, Camp's hands began to move on their own. He felt fast. He felt strong, as the adrenaline kicked in and sent his heart into overdrive.

What if he's an agent? What if he's an agent? What if he's an— Joe Camp's mind shrieked as he reached for his pistol, swiping aside his jacket with his free hand with the flourish of a hero in a western. His palm fell upon the grip of the Colt .45 automatic, feeling the reassuring worn wood finish of the pommel, and as he tried to pull it free—felt his fingers one by one slip from the grip. The gun had become entangled in his belt, and the sweat on his palms had unexpectedly made a bad situation much, much worse. Camp's eye's widened as he saw Steuben (or the man who pretended to be Steuben) produce a .38 Webley revolver effortlessly, as if by magic, leveling it at his chest with the casual poise of a waiter lowering a tray to a expectant diner. The look on the man's face was stern, the only one he seemed capable of, that of a man setting to a hard and disagreeable task which was somehow necessary, despite any unpleasantness it might impart upon him.

These are the last seconds of your life, a voice which was not Joe Camp's own spoke quietly in his mind, and Camp felt his innards go cold and drop away, like a huge, dark shaft had opened within him. Everything was lost behind the sound of his heart in his ears.

Then, like a silent movie, sudden violent action erupted in the hallway, without a sound. The banisters to Joe Camp's right exploded into splinters of wood. Holes of instant and unknown manufacture stitched their way up the wall near the open doorway, twice bisecting the would-be Steuben with perfect pin pricks of red (and spraying the wall behind him with tiny splatters of black). Steuben's stern expression never changed during the eruption. Joe Camp stood transfixed, staring, as the world ahead of him was perforated a hundred times or more, all in complete silence. Steuben collapsed with a meaty thud, and the sound returned to the scene along with a high-pitched tinny whining like the siren on a police car heard from far away. An incredible amount of blood flowed out from beneath the body in a huge pool, spreading down the gaps of wood in the floor like rivers and spilling over the opening to the stairs like tiny waterfalls of red, spattering far down below in drips and drabs. Camp smelt gunpowder and felt his legs almost give way. His hands, of their own volition, found the remains of the banister for a moment, long enough to steady himself. Sharp splinters of shattered wood slipped into his fingers unnoticed.

He turned and met the gaze of the dark man, the man from the car which had followed him from the docks. An aborigine dressed in a white shirt stained with sweat and red dirt, with a flat nose and wide-set, intelligent black eyes. He smiled at Camp revealing a set of perfect white teeth (and to Joe, there seemed to be too many teeth to properly fit in the man's mouth). Two other aborigines were poised on the stairs armed with Sten guns, their muzzles still smoking. It was they who had obliterated Steuben, firing from behind and to the right of Camp, out of his range of vision.

What the hell were aborigines doing with 9mm Sten Mark 2 submachine guns? Were they British intelligence?

"You okay there, friend?" The aborigine shouted through a thick, Australian accent. Everything sounded muffled to Camp, like he had cotton in his ears.

"No," Joe Camp said and stumbled towards Steuben's body, retrieving his Colt from his belt, successfully this time. Surprisingly, the Aborigines simply watched him, neither leveling their weapons at him or warning him away to keep his gun where it was. Camp lifted the .45 and stepped back to Steuben, his feet tacky in the dead man's blood. He had no idea what he was doing. Steuben's Webley lay on the blood-soaked floor like an island in the middle of an immense red sea.

"That there ain't your fella. He's still alive. They got 'im out at the Boora-ground. We got to go, mister. You got no time there to be thinking. Choose 'em."

Joe Camp looked into the eyes of the aborigine for a moment, put his gun in his belt and lifted the revolver from the pool for blood, placing it in his jacket pocket, his hands and pocket stained red. He looked into the aborigine's eyes and then, risking it, Joe Camp returned his pistol to his belt and shoved the body over, turning his back on them. The dead man who might or might not be Mark Steuben lay face-up now, in the hallway, chest cut to ribbons, drenched in his own blood. His white shirt was now a stained several shades of pink, and his face (which still held a stern expression, eyes open) was slathered with dark black blood. Camp fiddled in the man's pockets and came up with a small billfold.

Flipping it open with bloodstained hands he found a photostatic copy of a prospector's license for a Robert F. Mackensie, resident of Darwin, Australia, and a few Australian pound notes, along with a small bank key tucked carefully in a well-worn pocket of leather. Camp thought maybe it went to a safe deposit box. The man hadn't sounded Australian. Camp mulled this over and turned to look at his strange saviors, who looked back at him with the implacable stare of the divinely inspired. Camp felt he had wandered into the religious ceremony of a denomination he could not identify.

"Where to now?" was all that Joe Camp said, and the aborigine who had given him the ultimatum smiled.

"They got them a right powerful munkumbole out there in the desert, those're the ones that got yer' friends." The leader of the group of Aborigines, Maljarna, spoke plainly, without any attempt at beguilement, as Joe Camp sat in the back of their rotted-out Packard. It sped to the west, out of town, pushing its engine to the limit by the sound of it. The sun was a bloated, orange sphere nearing the horizon, and the sky was aflame with a million warm colors. Joe Camp was very aware of being very far from home. Even Burma felt more like home than Australia. Everything somehow looked foreign; even the colors seemed slightly wrong.

"What's a mukumo—" Camp began.

"Munkumbole. A wizard."

"How do you know all this?" Somehow Camp didn't doubt what the man had to say—the honesty of his words shone through his bright, calm face—but he wanted to know everything he could about it. Despite his questionable circumstances, Joe Camp felt safe for the first time since he had stepped from the plane at Port Hedland. The aborigines reminded him of the Kachins, and the comfort, love, and respect he felt among the 4a seemed also to radiate from the natives of the Australian continent naturally, like they knew of no other way to be. Maljarna turned to face Joe in the back seat.

"We been watching them, the ones in league with the Nulla. My people have been at them for a long time. It gathers people from time to time, out in the Talbot Ranges. Bad people. Mostly whites though—no offense." Maljarna shook his head sadly, and Joe Camp was reminded of Keta's words in the jungle about the Tachoans. Very bad people. The similarities gave him the creeps. Although he had read extensively on the aborigine culture at Harvard, Joe Camp could not put his finger to the term Nulla, even though he could swear he had heard it before.

"Why did they take them? How did you know about me?"

“Got lots of questions, don’tcha?” Maljarna smiled again and laughed, a short harsh sound, like the cry of a huge bird. “Yeah. We saw it all go on. We trail ‘em when they come into the city from out the Gibson Desert, which ain’t all that often—so we knew this was somethin’ special. They snatched the whole group of your guys one by one as they came in. Before that they took some Brits, I think. I assume you’re one of ‘em, yeah? The Americans that came in after? Course you are. First it was messy, but then they learned something which got the other two to go with them easy. We thought they got all they wanted, but then they went out for you.”

“Yeah, I’m an American.” Camp didn’t think he could hide it anyway; he just looked American, naturally, like a Norman Rockwell painting come to life. He imagined himself as the foolish-looking lovesick boy with the drooping flowers calling on a girl for the first time, all knobby edges and gangly limbs, with thick, black-rimmed glasses to hide his blue eyes.

“So why did they take them, yeah? I don’t know. They took ‘em, though, we know that. We know it ‘cause we were there. But there were too many of ‘em before to try to stop ‘em. This last one was a poor showing for them, you was lucky there, son. Don’t know why they took you to the building there. They never did nothin’ like that before, but usually they are in numbers.”

“Prolly to kill ‘em, Mal,” the squat aborigine who sat in the back seat next to Joe offered, helpfully.

“Yeah, ah’suppose.” Maljarna turned back to consider the road and directed the driver to turn at an intersection away from the hillside streets and the hundreds of peaked rooftops and brightly painted houses which led down to the ocean. The car’s tires spun in the dirt as they turned, kicking up a huge cloud of red dust, as they began to head south away from the city. The ocean soon disappeared and the land became more rugged, with sparse, sun-dead grasses and gnarled trees broken only by old abandoned homesteads. The sky had become a luminous uniform yellow, rich with highlights of orange and red.

“I, uh...appreciate...uh...all your help. All of you. Call me Joe.” He felt foolish as he said it, but the men in the car seemed genuinely pleased with his casualness.

“Yeah, sure Joe. What else?” Maljarna replied over his shoulder distracted, directing the driver to take another fork. The dirt path ahead seemed to be an endless series of forks.

Camp pushed himself back in the seat and looked at the frayed leather ceiling. Through pin-sized holes in the leather he could see the sky and feel tiny lines of wind as they blew through the roof. He sighed and looked at Maljarna, but his mind was working too quickly for anything of use to come out. Caught somewhere between Harvard and the dead man in the hallway, it seemed he could not focus on the now.

“What are we going to do now?” Camp choked out, his mind suddenly blank.

“We’re headin’ out to our camp at the range. When I say ‘our,’ I mean us, all of us, the Ngaanyatjarra. Old Muluwari is holdin’ his own Boora ceremony out there. We’re goin’ to have a

good old Corroboree. We're goin' to stop 'em. The lot of 'em, like we done before. Like all our dads done before."

"These...whites? Are they German or...?"

"Nah. Nothing like that, mate. It's got nothing to do with yer little spat. It's somethin' else. Somethin' older. Anythin' else there, Joe?" Maljarna almost seemed annoyed with the last question, like the facts were on the table and already obvious to anyone with half a brain. Almost like Camp's question was something a child would ask.

"No. Just give me a minute to think." Camp opened the dead man's billfold again: Robert F. Mackensie, prospector, now beneath dried, bloody fingerprints. What did it all mean?

They drove on.

"How did you know the others were American?" Joe's voice sounded strained; his mind raced around the problem and found no obvious solutions. What the hell was all this? Tribes. Nulla. Australians with American accents. Aborigines with Sten guns. Once again, Joe Camp found himself longing for the security of the Burmese highlands. The jungle, the Kachins, hell, even the Japanese, at least all of those were known quantities. Here he was swimming in unknowns.

"He wants to know how we knew they was Americans..." Maljarna reflected quietly.

For a single heart-pounding moment, as all the aborigines in the car burst out laughing, Joe imagined he was being driven off into the desert to be eliminated. This had all been a ruse. This...But it didn't make any sense. They hadn't taken his gun, they had saved him. And what of the others he was to meet? Mark Steuben? Wingate Peaslee? His orders at Nazira had sent him here to meet with Steuben to be briefed, before moving on to—where? The orders didn't say. They just mentioned he was being extracted due to his deep jungle experience. Where, then? Africa? South America? Was the man posing as Mark Steuben, the corpse named Robert Mackensie, a German agent? How did he know their meeting code? Joe knew no other OSS contacts in Australia. But he could turn himself into the American embassy here without difficulty. Something told him the aborigines would simply let him go, even drive him back to town to the embassy, even after all this trouble. The feeling surprised him for some reason. Even though he felt safe, almost like he was among family, in the stuffy, overheated car. It still surprised him.

"D'you really want to know about all the things us black fellas know? How we know? D'ya really, Joe? If ya come with us, if ya come to see the Nulla, you going ta have ta." Maljarna turned back to consider him, his face, for the first time since Joe Camp had met him, completely serious.

"How did you know, Mal?"

"Magic." Maljarna whispered, winking at Joe Camp, the aborigine's lips breaking into a thin, cheshire grin.

They flashed past a decrepit homestead. Two people on a hill, a half mile from the road, little more than silhouettes in the gathering dusk, watched as their car chose the right fork. The Packard tore south along the dirt road towards a town which a beaten, bullet-eaten, tin sign claimed was called Marble Bar. Things were rapidly spiraling out of control, but Joe Camp could see no way to slow his descent.

CHAPTER 19:
All that I now possess seems to me far away

March 4, 1943: Leopoldville, Belgian Congo

Fifteen hours on a wheezing, overcrowded train which had seen service since the turn of the century had left Thomas Arnold nearly spent. He unloaded his gear and sat down on it amidst the filth and squalor of Leopoldville, sweaty, bug-bitten and exhausted. King Leopold of Belgium had "civilized" the Congo by enslaving the native populace in the later half of the last century, ripping into the heart of the jungle to tear out whatever there was to take. To Arnold, the filth of Leopoldville seemed a fitting epitaph to a country, and a king, now under the boot of Nazi oppression. Now this was Belgium. All that remained of a once proud-country was its most foreign and hellish holding, a place which stunk of starvation, crime and a thinly veiled servility. This Conrad-esque landscape was all the Belgians who had escaped the Nazi blitzkrieg in Europe could call their own.

The "station," which was little more than a place where the tracks were crossed by a rapidly decaying paved road, and where the jungle broke on one side revealing a shanty town, was overrun with foot traffic, most of it native. After the wave of people piled off the train on which Arnold and his group had been for the better part of a day, thousands more piled onto it behind him, riding the same route back to Boma, on the coast. Arnold wished dearly he could go with them. Wailing children, shouts of indignation in a dozen different languages, the squeal of hogs and the screech of the wheels of the train as it slid forward, each insisted itself upon him, interrupting his vain attempt at rest, at respite. Arnold clutched his head and stared down into the dust. The four other members of the DELTA GREEN team stood nearby, guarding a crate of explosives and the rest of their gear, along with a companion who was not human. It was funny how normal the thought seemed to him now.

The foot traffic in the "station" died off as suddenly as it had formed, the people either disappearing onto the train or off into the lopsided, decaying shacks of Leopoldville. Arnold could not take it anymore; the circumstances had become too strange. "Dr. Smith"—it—stood with the rest of the group, undetected, ignored. Smith was watching him. Always watching him.

Even now, he could feel alien eyes on the back of his neck, trying to find a way into his mind like a thief fiddling with a difficult lock. Smith had haunted him on their journey half-way across the world, always hovering on the edge of speech, observing his every move with a detachment which made him seem at times to be ethereal, so unreal that Arnold had to remind himself that others could see him as well.

A young Bantu child rushed up to Arnold and began chattering in French, grabbing at his packs with tiny hands.

"I carry them, sir. I carry."

Huge, jaundiced eyes, swollen stomach, random swatches of rotting cloth used as clothes. The boy was too small to move the gear but he tried anyway, even though they were pinned down by Arnold's weight as he sat on them. Arnold, unmoved, looked up at the boy, whose face was fixed somewhere between frustration and desperate need, and found he felt nothing. Even now he could see the child on the side of one of the filth-covered roads of Leopoldville lying in refuse, his body pregnant with gas and flies, eyes empty of everything. There was no reason to help the child, Arnold thought; soon enough the world would have its way. He would finally be at peace, the boy. No more struggle or want. A coin would do no good against time and circumstance.

The child's eyes fixed on the cloth-covered box on Arnold's lap with a look indicating he was going to grab for the only thing he seemed capable of carrying. Before he could, Arnold placed a huge hand on the boy's sparrow-like chest and gave him a rough shove. The child spilled to the ground in the dirt, kicking up a cloud of white dust. Arnold carefully checked the contents of the cloth sack. The alien device lay inside, untouched. The boy stood again despite cuts on his knees, eyes defiant and mad, and spit curses at Arnold.

Arnold gave him a coin anyway and the child ran off into the filth to die.

"So, sir, what now?" the smiling Gurkha asked in slightly accented English. Manbahadur Rai was one of Major Cornwall's men, and was along as their impromptu jungle specialist, since the OSS was having some transportation and contact problems in the Pacific. Arnold's information was spotty at best since they had left Matadi two days before, but it seemed some of their men had run into some incident in Australia; further details were not provided. Cornwall had alerted the members of the PISCES team which had been sent earlier to monitor the situation in the Congo to fill in the gaps of the DELTA GREEN team. It seemed between the British and American forces they could only scrape together four human souls who were willing to save the world.

Rai had served in Burma himself for three months, fighting a guerrilla war against the Japanese in the canopied jungle of the Burmese highlands. He was tiny but looked in some way...ready. Rai somehow managed to always be prepared for anything which might occur. That was what came to mind when confronted with such a vibrant presence; his grasp of every situation was plain for anyone to see. Endlessly upbeat and incapable, it seemed, of tiring, Rai hauled packs like he was an ant, lugging a full load of gear which looked improbably huge upon his back. He could walk for hours (a fact he demonstrated when the train broke down at Boma the day before), hauling any load up slopes, stairs, anywhere. The Nepalese tribesman never lost his breath or looked winded. He never sweated. He was the perfect fighting machine.

Arnold, watched as Rai removed his kukri from its sheath with a tiny, childlike hand. The huge, hooked fighting knife was razor sharp and could, when used properly, take an enemy's limb off with one well-placed slice. Often, when fighting in guerrilla actions, it was the only weapon the Gurkha used. The Japanese had learned the hard way that it was a superior weapon.

Rai checked his perfect white teeth in the reflection of the blade. Arnold, despite his dour

mood, smiled and looked back at their group.

The three other members of the team stood in a tight circle about fifteen feet behind them, gathered around a pile of equipment. Smith stood off to one side, watching Arnold with unblinking, lizard eyes. Two were OSS men recently churned out of the newly minted United States commando production line: Louis Jackson, from Jackson, Mississippi, by way of Yale, who was in charge of explosives and who looked like a car salesman, and Archibald (never Archie) Haulewell from New York, who was there just in case something happened to Jackson. The other man was a PISCES intelligence analyst who had prepared the report on the local rumors regarding the grey city in the Congo, and who had contacts in the bush. Despite numerous introductions, Arnold could still not place the man's name. There were just too many facts to consider which seemed far more important.

"Well, Rai, I guess we wait for the train for Lumbaso and then we're off to Loto. Then it looks like it's into the jungle." Arnold stood up and lifted his rucksack up with a grunt.

"Yes, sir." Rai deftly returned his kukri to its sheath in a single fluid motion that simultaneously nicked his thumb, drawing the smallest trickle of blood. Rai's explanation that Gurkha tradition demanded that the sacred kukri never be returned to its sheath without being blooded had not made Arnold any less uncomfortable about seeing him do it.

"How's the explosives? Did Jackson check them?"

"Good. Good. Yes, sir."

"They have me paranoid, Rai. It's a rough trip out there."

"Don't worry, sir, nothing but electricity can set it off. I hear you can even cook the composition-B in a fire, and nothing—"

"All right, Rai."

"Sir," Rai said, and trotted back to the group.

As the hours passed their group separated, individuals breaking off to smoke cigarettes, to talk to one another in hushed tones, or to be alone. Only Smith remained completely aloof. At one point, Jackson confided to Arnold in a thick southerly drawl that the contents of their box of explosives would:

"Give all the heads on Mount Rushmore a severe headache."

No one could know what Arnold did. The explosives would never be used in the manner their orders prescribed. He would never allow them to be—even if he had to kill every man on his team with his own hands to prevent it. The city of Thule would survive him, that much he was sure of. Whether it survived him by minutes or decades, only after death it would no longer be his

responsibility. Until then, the city, Thule, would come to no harm.

When the second train came in, the one that would wind its way to Lumbaso in the center of the jungle, Arnold and his group loaded their gear onto it and were given a seat up front by the white Belgian conductor who smiled at them through rotted, yellow teeth. The crowd outside mysteriously congealed again as if by instinct, pushing and screaming and moving, each person sure of his or her own importance above all others. Small clusters of hogs, boxes of chickens, and hundreds of other animals were rapidly pushed aboard by the natives, who treated each small animal with the love usually reserved for children.

Arnold settled into a polished wood chair as the car filled up in a matter of minutes with children, old women and animals. The rest of his team shoved their way on to the seats across from him. And as he knew he would, Arnold found himself looking directly into the flat eyes of Dr. Smith who stared through him with the implacable gaze of a man trying to dissect a particularly difficult puzzle. Smith looked carefully at the bag on Arnold's lap. The bag which held the alien "camera" device. Trying, it seemed, to look through the bag and wood to the alien interior of the machine. Its eyes remained fixed on the box for a long time. The train began to slowly lurch forward.

"Why do you not take any pictures?" Smith suddenly asked. Arnold could not be sure, but he thought he heard a note of amusement in its voice.

INTERLUDE 5:
To restore all as it was, my life in reward

March 1, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts

The Motion agent dropped the brown paper sack full of electronic components down on the table in the cluttered apartment. The humans had stopped hours before, exhausted, but the thing in the boy's body continued its labor. They had been toiling for the last five days straight, slowly assembling intricate and bizarre contraptions at the behest of their master. The boy considered the exhausted servant for a moment with contempt, searched through the paper sack for a small roll of silver wire, and waved the human away with an impatient gesture. The human shuffled out, the same way he had come in, head downcast and eyes bloodshot. Moving a large electronic component out of the way, the Motion man swept the door shut and locked it behind him.

Inside an apartment, as it had done in a thousand places a thousand times before, the Motion had set up shop to construct the devices of the Great Race, utilizing the crude tools of the era to fulfill the council's demands. The attic room was empty except for the barest essentials. None of the usual furniture was present (except for a large wood table and three mismatched chairs), but the apartment was filled with various hand-made components which had yet to be fitted into the machine the group had been working diligently to complete. The being called One considered the fruits of its labor, the device it had been constructing on the table for five days now. Since its conversation with the human, Thomas Arnold, its intellect had been processing all the requirements of such a device, looking for flaws and errors in the humans' contributions with a critical eye. It would have to redouble its efforts to complete it in time. Even now the precipice in time approached.

The device covered the entire table in odd, geometric shapes and was composed of hundreds of separate segments of wires, glass and mirrors fastened to slots of wood and cardboard with tiny, soldered hooks of melted metal. The construction was filled with large geometric gaps which opened to its wire-filled interior, within which the various separate components now scattered about the apartment—built by the harried Motion agents under One's direction—would be inserted when the time was right. One would have to complete the device soon, for now it knew, after contacting the council, that the ward at Thule would fail on March 21, 1943. Past that, no recovery of the timeline would be possible.

Temporal communication with the council of Pnakotus indicated that the traitor's actions had devastated the future timeline. Causality in which the Great Race could exist past November 5, 1945, was completely gone, replaced by a void within which no species existed that the Great Race could occupy. Human civilization, and with it the circumstances which would lead to any future civilizations on the Earth, completely disappeared on that day. The council had already lost four scouts probing the darkness past that time. With the information One had provided on the trap

the traitor had set for it, the council now knew that their greatest enemy would be released on March 21, 1943, when some event would destroy the ward. The Great Race's greatest secret had been compromised.

Following orders, One had informed the human, Thomas Arnold, of the dire consequences of destroying the ward in the Congo. One had given the human a device to prevent this circumstance from coming to pass, the companion device to the one it was constructing now. If One did not complete the device it was working on before the humans and Smith arrived at Thule, existence past November 5, 1945, would cease to be. It would forever eliminate the careful and precise path through time that the Great Race had spent eons sculpting and maintaining. Once released, the great enemy would never be confined again.

Soon enough it would all come to pass, One thought to itself. It continued to rapidly solder components. It was learning that pointless conjecture was one of the first effects of its intellect being housed within a human shell. The traitor and One would meet again in the limited future, and what would become then? It did not know, but it had an idea. They were equals, and like equals they would cancel each other out when their time came.

It knew the truth of time in a way no human could. Events occurred, or they did not. There were few possible outcomes for any event. The traitor would perish, or the future of the world would die in its stead.

CHAPTER 20:
The art of our necessities is strange

February 23, 1943: Ngaanyatjarra Camp, Gibson Desert, Australia

Old Muluwari, a hunched, wrinkled, dark-skinned aborigine, looked into Joe Camp's eyes and smiled a toothless smile, and Camp felt the warmth of the good man flow into him. It was just that plain. Camp could think of no other way to put it; the feelings flowed out of the man in waves, like heat from the sun. After two days of relentless travel, by car and at last on foot, Camp had somehow found himself in the midst of Western Australia's Gibson Desert in the middle of the drought season, surrounded by a gathering of more than a hundred aborigines.

Camp was sitting at a huge, roaring fire next to the elder, Muluwari, while Maljarna and the other aborigines, the men who had saved him, chattered away in their native tongue behind him. Dozens of others, unknown to him, talked and laughed in low voices, in an aborigine tongue sprinkled with bits of English which Joe could still not piece together. At first he found it disconcerting that he was the only white man in the entire group, but soon, as hospitality was lavished upon him, he felt that discomfort drop away. Everything was very relaxed and informal, and a strong feeling of family permeated the camp. Children were smiling and happy, laughter was the predominant display of emotion—but underneath it all was something Joe Camp could not put his finger to. Something dark. And then there were the weapons.

Several dozen men in the gathering held guns, some of them modern automatic weapons of British design. Others were armed with traditional weapons, boomerangs and wari wari spears. It looked to Camp like the tribe was preparing for war, or at the very least self-defense.

Old Muluwari barked something in his native tongue and a boy rushed to gather what Camp assumed was food from a large, flat bowl, but the boy ran off into the dark, clutching the bowl to his spindly chest, disappearing down the hill.

The tribal gathering, or corroberrie as it was called by the aborigines, was positioned on the near-empty, drought-ravaged Lake Woolomber in a small depression in the artesian basin, with a good view out to the north of the Gibson Desert, which the aborigines had been watching with some diligence since their arrival. Joe Camp had gained no answers since his arrival, but had figured that the Ngaanyatjarra would fill him in when the time was right. During his time among the Kachins he had learned not to question the natural order of things, but to become a part of that order through patience. Camp was nevertheless amazed at his surroundings. It all astounded him, both the circumstances which lead him here and at the comfortable feeling he gained by watching the smiling tribesmembers as they laughed and talked.

It all seemed so unreal but so right at the same time.

An hour before, night had suddenly fallen like a curtain and the temperature had plummeted more than twenty degrees to a balmy eighty. By then the fire had been raging and all the tribe had gathered around it.

Old Muluwari let out a cough and the entire gathering fell quiet. Only the roar and crackle of the fire could be heard. All eyes were drawn, somber and expectant, to the old man as he shifted his frail form forward closer to the fire.

"I am talkin' about the Nulla," Old Muluwari croaked in a feeble voice. The boy returned from the dark with the wood bowl filled with clear, cool water, from what remained of Lake Woolomber, Camp assumed. Muluwari took a long sip with shaking hands and then placed the bowl near his callused feet. The elder turned to Camp and smiled again. Joe suddenly realized Muluwari had chosen to speak in English for his benefit alone.

"The Nulla come before all this here. He come before Ngadjon come to the world. Afore everything. The Nulla is the uncle to time."

Joe Camp watched the eyes of those listening and they were all transfixed, staring at Muluwari with religious awe. The little boy sat down next to the old man, who placed a loving hand on the boy's head. The little boy smiled. Muluwari continued:

"I saw 'im once or two. Back in my day when I was a young one, like this here one. The Nulla lives in the Mija Norambu, his home of rock." Muluwari pointed to the north with a hand wracked by arthritis. "His great weight sinks him down in the earth and he can not come out. He chews the stones of the earth for his food, and those 'at are too hard he spits them out. But he not forgotten the upper world. Not at all. He is clever, the Nulla."

"He find the men which he wantin'. Men with no souls. They come to the Nulla, they are drawn to the Nulla like water run down the mountain in the wet season. Men who give what they got from the Yamani away without thinkin'. Those men thinkin' they can outsmart the Nulla, but no man can outsmart time. And the Nulla, he older than time." Muluwari drew some more water from the bowl at his feet and coughed.

"The Nulla, he can call the wind down on his enemy. He can take his mind away. The Nulla is what you come to when you got nothin' left inside you."

The little boy piped up suddenly, drawing several quick smiles from the others:

"Why can't the Nulla leave the Mija Norambu, father?"

Muluwari thought about this for a little while and then looked at the boy.

"The Nulla, he been here since the beginning of everything, and he has the knowing of the whole world in his head. He grown to fit all this knowin' until he could not move no more. Out in the

ranges. But slowly, even though he did not want no more, more knowin' came to him, even as he lay still out there. The color of the sky each day, the way the birds move through the air, the coming and going of the first men. They weigh him down more and he sink into the ground. Even now, through his men the Nulla learn more and sink deeper. Some day he fall through the earth."

A muttering from the crowd, followed the last comment, and the little boy's eyes were filled with fear.

"When will this happen, father?"

"Some say this'll not happen ever. Others say sooner than that." Muluwari rubbed the child's head with a gnarled, arthritic hand in a reassuring manner and the boy looked lost in deep thought.

"The Nulla, he not too smart, though. He got his weakness. We. The Ngaanyatjarra. We been set on this task by the Yamani since the Ngadjon come to this place. We watch 'em, when they go to the whites, or when the whites come out here into the flats. Some mean well and know nothin' of the Nulla and we let them be." Muluwari's ancient eyes fixed on Joe for a second. "Others get caught up by his song and turn to his service. And some of them were always his servants, since time started."

Muluwari finished the water in the bowl in one long gulp and looked up again. The wind had grown, coaxing the fire up into the night in shower of a million tiny sparks.

"You wonderin' why the Nulla do all this, eh? Why he send his men out into the world if what he learn from them will sink him deeper?" Muluwari shrugged his thin shoulders and searched the eyes of the tribe.

"Why? Don't know. No one but the Nulla know that. But I think he want to find a way out of the ground he in. A way to get him free of the hole. That's why he send the men out, I would think." Muluwari's eyes flickered over the rippling fire.

"He know all about time, before, after, it was part of him, 'cause he uncle to it. So he send his men out on strange errands, hoping to find what he need to get free of the hole. Knowin' before it happen what is to happen."

The little boy interrupted again: "Then why don't the Nulla know when he going to get free from the hole, father?"

"Knowin' is a trick. Knowin' what come next in time is the trick of the Nulla. He buy men with this trick. The Nulla pretend to know it all. But he don't. He know what time want him to know. He pretend to be more than he is, but time is trickier than the Nulla and he change things on his uncle when he is not lookin'." Muluwari giggled, and snorted as he thought of this prospect. Others in the crowd smiled and joined the elder in his revelry. But the group sank back into former mood, the humor disappearing from their faces quickly.

“But we must never think he is gone. The Nulla pays no mind to age and time, for he come afore it all. He will always be there out in the ranges, waiting, until the end of the world. And we will keep him in the ground ‘til the end of it all.”

“What is a Nulla, exactly?” Joe Camp inquired politely, and all eyes in the crowd fell on him with the same heavy feeling of expectation old Muluwari’s speech had brought. Almost like his inquiry, though spur of the moment, had been expected the whole time.

“You Joe Camp?” Muluwari asked with his eyebrows raised, turning his body around to face him. Joe found himself reflected back in the fire’s glow within the old man’s eyes. He had not been introduced to the elder, but he assumed Maljarna had informed the old man of his name and how he came to be there.

“Yes,” Camp answered, his mouth numb. Over in the dark, past the elder, Joe could see Maljarna’s face, dire, watching him.

“You come here to find a man not known to you, but who is your brother?”

“Yes...sir.”

“Then don’t you worry, Joe Camp. You find out about the Nulla soon enough.”

CHAPTER 21:
Death stands in the background, but do not be afraid

March 13, 1943: Somewhere near Itoko, Belgian Congo

When the team woke on the morning of the thirteenth, Thomas Arnold had already known for hours that they were on their own. Deep down, he had sensed it was coming since they had crossed the last, wild river (the Salonga) a day back. Their guide, a half N'Bangu native from the area, had offered a bit of his own blood at the water's threshold before hesitantly crossing it. This thin, defiant man they had hired at Loto had become like a scared child in a matter of minutes when they came upon that river. It was a cursed place to him and his tribe, a boundary which was not to be passed except by those who wished to disturb the spirits and enter the world which lay beyond. It was obvious the guide never believed the whites would venture so far into the interior, or would dare to cross the threshold to the spirit world, but they had continued onward, unmindful of the magic. To his credit, the guide went on—but only long enough to escape undetected. All the other natives stole away along with him. The spell of melancholy the place wove on the natives proved too strong for even those born of the cities.

The other team members had remained oblivious to the growing tensions among the natives, who the DELTA GREEN and PISCES men saw as somehow less significant than real people. But to Arnold, the signs were there and completely obvious. Rai, the Gurkha, seemed to sense the unease as well. When they crossed the Salonga the bearers, mostly men from the deep interior, had gained a look Thomas Arnold knew well. He had seen it in Barnsby's eyes when he clutched Peaslee's missive. He had seen it in the faces of his men on the Nez de Joubourg cliffs. He had seen it in the blank, dead eyes of Bruning. It was the look of men who have fallen into a dream and cannot wake up.

Arnold knew exactly what had started the natives on the path of slowly growing hysteria. On the morning of the fourth, two days out of the tiny outpost of Loto, which they had come into by train, their guide had come upon the first huge piece of masonry, overgrown and vine eaten but still mostly intact, sticking from the ground like a giant's discarded plaything. On one side, shielded by the overgrowing trunk of a huge tree, a portion of the sculpture and writing on its surface had remained unspoiled. Humungous, curvilinear letters which everyone in the party claimed they could not identify covered the surface in complicated patterns. The guide would not touch it, and began mumbling to himself in French and his native tongue when prompted with questions about the stone's origin. With a knife, the guide made a series of complex ritualistic movements in front of his ashen face before moving on. He refused to stay near the block as the group investigated it. The stone made Arnold think of the late Professor Peaslee's manuscript, and a million blocks like it in the sandblown deserts of Australia, half a world away.

Since that day they discovered the rock, the natives had become irritable.

Other, smaller stones with writing on them were found from time to time as they journeyed inland, and with each new discovery the morale of the natives grew worse. At one point the N'Bangu guide honestly pleaded with Arnold in broken French not to travel any further into the interior. Arnold could say nothing to allay the man's fears, and could offer him no reward to brighten his spirits.

They continued for nine, tension-filled days without omen.

When they woke on the morning of the thirteenth, the camp, which had contained more than twenty men, was empty save for the members of the DELTA GREEN team and Dr. Smith. The natives had crept off in the night, leaving all that they carried behind—food, fresh water, equipment. Arnold did not need a guide to tell him that this was unusual. Usually a mutinous group would kill their masters, steal everything they could carry and head deeper into the interior. Instead the men had slunk off, leaving a camp rich with valuable weapons and explosives behind, as if everything in the camp, having crossed some invisible boundary had become tainted. Arnold, awake but feigning sleep, let them go when he realized they wished only to escape. He almost hoped they would take the explosives with them. Who could blame them? A fight with them over their attempt at self-preservation would serve no purpose. It seemed fitting to Arnold that someone should survive this mess.

On the morning of the thirteenth, after the five men divvied up a small amount of the supplies, they secured the rest of the equipment within a deadfall near the rapid-filled Lomela River. No one in the group, Arnold imagined, was foolish enough to believe that they would live long enough to see those supplies again.

Rai had taken over as guide, navigating them north and the east to where the grey city called Thule was rumored to be, as it was marked on the vague maps recovered from ***Observation on the Several Parts of Africa***. They trudged through endless vaults of giant trees, cutting their way through the seven-foot-high underbrush in the dark, navigating the tricky, slope-filled terrain. A few shafts of light shone unobstructed to the jungle floor like spotlights, illuminating tiny patches of plants so brightly that they appeared to be artificial. For six hours they were hounded by clouds of biting bugs so thick that they obscured vision, but the team had pushed on relentlessly. Following the inexhaustible Rai, no one wanted to show weakness by admitting fatigue.

With their guide and bearers gone, the tiny group wound its way through the jungle in nearly perfect silence, surrounded by the alien sounds of untamed nature, listening to the cries of distant, unseen animals lost up in the tangled web of the dark canopy.

It was nearing three o'clock when Rai hunkered down on the crest of a small rise, still beneath the endless canopy. The little Gurkha was there one moment and then vanished into the underbrush as rapidly as a rabbit going to ground. Rai let out a quiet whistle and held his hand, palm flat, up above the plants for the entire group to see. Behind Arnold, Jackson and Hauellwell placed the crate of the explosive compound, Composition B, on the ground between them and carefully unslung their submachine guns. Arnold cocked his Thompson slowly, hoping not to make too much

noise; the bolt clicking seemed very loud in the stillness of the stifling heat. The DELTA GREEN team hunkered down and listened to the jungle.

Everything was silent beneath the normal sounds of the forest: the shrill cries of birds and monkeys, water running in rapid falls as it spilled down the crests of hills from high above, the arrhythmic occasional crashing of something bigger moving through the bush. Their ears sorted through this chaos, searching for something deliberate and man-made—and then Arnold heard the first footfalls.

People were moving through the underbrush. Arnold could hear them, a group crashing through the undergrowth without apparent concern, a short distance away but growing closer by the second. Arnold poked his head up and looked back at Jackson and Hauewell, who were hunkered down, guarding the explosives. Behind them the PISCES intelligence analyst, Morgan Kitely, squatted clutching his Delisle carbine, his eyes as big as saucers. Dr. Smith was nowhere to be found. He had been walking behind Kitely just minutes before, but now he was gone. The alien was gone and an unknown force of men was approaching them.

Shit.

Arnold trotted up the slope towards Rai, his Thompson submachine gun clutched to his chest like a prayer. Rai's eyes met his in the dark of the underbrush. The little Gurkha held his Sten in one hand and grip of his sheathed kukhri in the other. He raised his thick eyebrows in a questioning expression. The racket in the jungle grew closer.

"Rai," Arnold whispered. "C'mon." Arnold, in a crouch, dashed over the crest of the slope towards the noise, head safely below the plant cover, and Rai followed. The only thing to mark their passage was the ghostly whisper of the plants that parted in their wake. They crossed a small ravine and then went up another rise, pushing their way quietly through the brush. When they reached the crest of the second hill, Rai touched Arnold's shoulder and pointed through the openings in the undergrowth to the bowl-shaped, vegetation-choked terrain beneath them, a small portion of which was illuminated by a break in the canopy. From where they were, about a quarter mile from where they'd left their team, Arnold and Rai could see a small troop of natives heading straight for their comrades. Beyond those men Arnold could also spy singular intruders, nothing more than wakes in the high grass, converging on the slope on the far side of which Jackson and the rest of team were hunkered down.

"Shit," Arnold said and then they heard the harsh reports of submachine guns, a Sten and then an M3. The chatter intertwined and sent hundreds of small animals crashing through the underbrush, letting loose a wave of colorful birds from their near-perfect hiding places, each racing for the safety of the sky. Arnold leapt up, poking his head over the plant cover as he saw the natives running for the sound of the gunfire, which was coming from where they had left Jackson and Hauellwell. The natives wore the garb of the local tribe, the N'Bangu, but moved with no grace through the jungle. Instead they bolted forward, oblivious to the racket they were making. They held no recognizable weapons, but something like dread slipped into Arnold's heart when he saw the cylindrical metal shafts each held in his arms. The featureless gleam of the silver devices spoke of untold advancement.

They reminded him of the child at the hotel room.

Arnold and Rai charged towards the firefight. The tribesmen had already disappeared over the crest of the slope and were out of sight by the time Arnold and Rai had rushed up the hill, less than a minute behind them. Arnold quickly removed a grenade from his pack and hooked it through the spoon onto his shoulder harness. Rai cocked his Sten. As they ran both men looked at each other, and Arnold could see through Rai's illusion of invulnerability, but only for a moment. The little Nepalese man's eyes flinched each time a submachine gun blared from the far side of the hill, an unconscious reflex. Rai was ready, though, and Arnold had no doubt the man would follow him into the jaws of hell itself without hesitation.

Strange sounds answered the bursts of submachine gun fire from over the hill. Ear-splitting cracks like the snaps of a giant bullwhip. In time with these cracks, the darkness of the canopy was illuminated suddenly by stark bursts of white light which left harsh afterimages on Arnold's eyes. In those bursts of light each tiny aspect of the dark canopy above was illuminated in perfectly. As they reached the top of the rise that stood between them and the fire-fight Rai started forward, but Arnold jerked the little man back by the strap of his backpack. Something, some warning, danced across Arnold's mind. The sound—the light—lightning? Electricity?

For a split second they stood, heads just barely over the crest of the hill, listening to the sounds of the ambush. Then Arnold's mind finished the equation: Electricity + Composition B = ... With all his strength, Arnold slung the Gurhka back down the slope by his equipment harness.

"What—" Rai began to say, and then the world was lost in conflagration.

The buffeting, torturous wind ripped by Arnold's head like a train, missing him by inches, followed by the sharp burning needles of a million tiny splinters hitting his skin. Flight, just the feeling of being in the air, of being upside down. The terrible feeling of falling upside down towards an unknown point of impact, afterimages of the flash obscuring his vision as he hit. Leaves first, then a small tree which split and cracked under his weight, and finally a breath-stealing, muddy deadfall. The sounds of a thousand creatures the size of elephants crashing through the woods, the domino-like crashing fall of a hundred trees. A rasping overpowering wind, a pounding like a hammer on his skull—his breath, his heartbeat. Then a rain of tiny flaming pieces of wood, dropping from the sky as if by magic.

Something dug uncomfortably into his shoulder as he lay in the smoldering underbrush, and Arnold sat up, dazed, pulling an inch of pulverized blackened tree out of his arm in the process. The portion of wood fell to the ground but made no sound. The entire world was silent except for his pulse in his ears.

Blood began to cascade out of the gaping, black wound in his arm, but he felt nothing. Arnold put his hands to his legs and found them both intact. He clutched his face and found nothing amiss, though his sight was shot through with blotches of white and red and his face felt heavy. His submachine gun was beneath him, he was sitting on it, and the strap had broken. His grenade had rolled away somewhere into the jungle. He would have to fix that strap, he thought numbly, and

began to slowly gather up the remnants of his gear with his good arm.

Rai was over him then, saying something, looking as fit as always, somehow miraculously untouched by the apocalyptic event. The little Nepalese man grabbed Arnold's arm and looked at it. Pulling a case from his improbably large pack, which he settled on the ground like it was weightless, he tore a length of bandage out and began to wrap Arnold's arm, but Arnold shook him off and stood up shakily. The world rose and fell around him, like he himself was not even moving but the world was moving for him. Like a drunk he stumbled up the rise that he had been thrown down, and crumpled to his hands and knees on the crest in the middle of a gap in the underbrush. Rai ran up next to him. Arnold stood again with the man's help, but the world kept careening from side to side crazily, like he was watching it from the deck of a ship in rough water.

Where Haulewell and Jackson and Kitely had been at the bottom of the hill, where the natives had rushed, where the jungle had once grown, was now simply a wasteland. A huge, circular ditch of deep black more than fifty feet across cut into the earth like a giant pockmark, and the trees surrounding it had been knocked flat in concentric circles, some still on fire, others uprooted and flung about like matchsticks. The canopy itself had been violated, and the sun now shone down so brightly that Arnold, looking up into it, flinched away and found his eyes drawn again to the scene of devastation. Nothing lived within the circle.

A hundred yards of jungle had been incinerated by the explosion, the underbrush aflame or just gone, the ground rent into blast zones of black, grey and brown. Nothing of the team remained. Nothing of the natives remained. Nothing remained at all. Arnold felt his legs give way, finally, like a rusty hinge forced to open. His body was suddenly liquid and loose. The shock of his head hitting the ground felt like falling onto a pillow of feathers. He stared up at the sky past the burned remnants of trees to the unearthly glow of the sun. Beyond the haze, into the glow there was more. Past this world, was there respite? Was there some place where he might find peace? Rai was yelling at him from far away.

Was he staring at the same sky that left a smile on Karl Bruning's ruined, dead, face? Was it so wrong to want it all to be over? Didn't he deserve that peace, too? Hadn't he done his part? Something seeped into his mind like shame, spilling over his thoughts and tainting any dream he might have had of escape with the blackness of guilt.

No. He was the last vestige of hope in this abused world. He was all that was left, and Smith was loose and alive in the jungle. Arnold still had his part to do. A shiver ran through his body and shook it like a rag-doll. Rai was screaming at him now, but there was no sound. Arnold tried to focus on something, some little thing to bring him back, to bring him up out of the tunnel which had surrounded his vision. A green plant hung over his head, over Rai's head. Like Rai it was miraculously untouched by the explosion.

On it a small, luminous silver bug crawled over the huge expanse of the leaf, oblivious to the carnage around it. Everywhere else, everything past the leaf was gone, was void, but the bug crawled forward unmindful of larger events. The bug was alive, surrounded by nothing but disintegrated forest and an endless field of blast-ravaged dirt. Yet it continued forward. Arnold's hands limply tracked across his chest, a shaft of pure pain rippling up his body as he shifted his

blood-covered shoulder. His hands searched on their own for something which was gone, something which was important, something so vital that his hands, independent of thought, knew to search for it.

The sky began to flicker before his vision, shuttering in and out like a film sputtering to a stop on a screen. Black, then the sky, black and the sky. Arnold tried to pull his eyes wide, but realized too late that his vision was not obscured by his eyelids but something inside his body was wrong. Arnold's last thought before unconsciousness clutched his struggling mind was:

The box.

And then the rushing darkness.

CHAPTER 22:
A dance so complex even the dancer forgets the steps

March 1, 1943: Kilmaur Manor, Scotland

"Sit down, Alan," Major Cornwall said in a subdued voice, distractedly considering a conglomeration of photographs on his huge desk. Weak, yellow sunlight spilled in the vaulted window, leaving everything facing Alan Barnsby in shadow. Barnsby walked swiftly into the room and stood at the front of the desk, as stiff as the suits of armor which flanked Cornwall. Barnsby's thin, gaunt face was set in sharp angles. The tiny zig-zag, white scar traced its way across his brow, rippling with the tension in his frame. His anger was a vibrant thing, alive in the room like the hum of a tuning fork. The major looked up slowly, his face fixed in a frown which brought the edges of his waxed mustaches up at a strange angle.

"Alan?"

"Major. I wish to know your plans regarding the information I uncovered in America... sir." Barnsby's voice was high-pitched and unsure, like that of a boy confronting his father for the first time, and his eyes darted uncomfortably around the room.

Major Cornwall settled into his seat deliberately, letting out a small grunt. He glanced up at Barnsby and then down again at the photographs on his desk. In the grainy black and white photos huge stone blocks stood in limitless desert, looking as old and timeless as the sand itself. Aborigines and white men posed around the stones, looking windblown and lost, as small as ants in front of the huge masonry.

"Lieutenant, you are the last person I— " Cornwall began, his voice filled with quiet, angery disbelief.

"Stop, please, sir."

Cornwall glanced up and something shifted behind his blue-grey eyes. He let loose a long, drawn sigh and pointed at the chair implacably with a single taut finger. Barnsby sat suddenly as if commanded by God himself.

"It really doesn't do any good posturing with a 'talent,' does it, Alan?" Cornwall stood and stiffly straightened his starched uniform. He looked away from Barnsby and something like emotion bled through his voice as the sentence died on his lips. He cleared his throat and stared out the window onto the moors.

"What have you heard, Alan?"

“About the disappearances in Australia, sir. The American agents,” Barnsby sputtered.

“Who told you this?” Cornwall turned his head, looked Barnsby over once and then, realizing the frail man did not mean to answer, turned back to consider the window.

“What are you doing with my information, sir?”

“I am doing my best for England, Barnsby.” Cornwall’s voice was muffled and he drew a deep breath in, straightening his shoulders squarely, like he was at attention. A cloud passed over the muted sun.

“What are you doing with my information, sir?”

Cornwall turned suddenly.

“Your information simply pointed us in the direction of something we were searching for since 1940.”

Barnsby’s confusion let silence fill the room. The ticking of the huge clock rang against the dusty bookshelves and empty fireplace.

“What do you mean?”

Cornwall gave Alan Barnsby a small, deprecating smile.

“In 1940, I was still rebuilding my stable of talents from the disaster...but then you wouldn’t know about it. It was before your time, even before PISCES itself was formed—but the outlines of the division had already been established, and things were going well, until the disaster of 1925.” With a sweeping gesture Cornwall flattened his thin, blond, oil-slicked hair. Sweat stood on his brow in tiny beads.

“Disaster, sir?” Something dark moved in Barnsby’s gut, like the shadow of a memory.

“Let me ask you, Alan. In the spring of 1925, when you were fourteen years of age, do you recall any odd occurrences in your life?” Cornwall gathered the photographs on his table together, pushing them roughly into a accordion folder.

“It’s in my file, sir. You know all about the nightmares...” Even fifteen years later they leapt back without hesitation. The black dreams which had swept over his life. Like a tidal wave of sewage they had spilled into his adolescent nights, corroding and rotting everything good in his mind. During those dark days young Barnsby had stumbled about his life, drawn and ill, while at night a voice so deep and resonant Barnsby could feel it in his bones called to him from a place so terrible its burial at the bottom of an ocean was not enough to stop its power. A dead city in the absolute black of the sea, the shuffling of drowned monstrous forms stirring from the miles of filth

on the bottom. Creatures, heralds of the end of man, swimming up towards the sun, and what was worse—in the dreams he was there too, straining for the upper air, lungs bursting with effort. Barnsby had kept what he could to himself in those days, his sanity draining away as the voice grew more insistent and the city crept closer in his mind. Finally he had gone into fits on the last night of the dreams and was taken to a doctor. He drifted in and out of consciousness for eight hours. When he woke, the veil which had fallen over his life was gone. It was that plain. An invisible but very real weight was lifted from his mind.

Beyond that night the dreams had never recurred.

"Barnsby?" Major Cornwall was saying.

"Yes. Sorry."

"I see you remember the dreams. Those same dreams struck my pool of talents in 1925. Two died. Five went irretrievably mad, eleven others left the service for good. You suffered the same dreams as a young man. It is now how we test for the 'real McCoy,' as the Americans might put it. Nightmares in the spring of 1925 equals psychic talent. The dreams seem to be indicative of genuine psychic ability."

"But what did the dreams mean, sir?"

"I don't believe that is germane at the moment. In any case, I'm not sure you will want to know. I was speaking of our search for talents in the 1940s..."

"Well...I'm...go on, sir, I'm sorry." Barnsby's anger had somehow drifted away. He was now held rapt by the narrative. He leaned forward.

"Where was I? Yes. The recovery of our resources in the 1930s. We searched the globe for 'talents' to replace those we had lost in the debacle of 1925. In the crown colonies and abroad. One of particular interest was discovered in Darwin, Australia, in 1940. Lawrence Hutchins was his name. He made a living by predicting world events for second-rate spiritualist magazines, and he was strikingly accurate, at least for a time. We became interested in Hutchins—"

"So he was a precognitive, like Mr. Briggs or Miss Chalmers?"

"No." Cornwall leaned down and removed a file from his front desk drawer. It was sitting at the front of the drawer as if Cornwall had perused it recently, or perhaps he knew this confrontation with Barnsby was coming. Barnsby did not need to use his talent to guess which circumstance it was. Cornwall was one of the brightest men he had ever known. Next to the workings of Cornwall's mind, Barnsby felt like a child playing chess with a master.

"I don't think I understand, sir."

"Hutchins, it was discovered, had somehow come upon a cache of...books. Odd books.

Old...books." Cornwall removed an aged, coffee-stained photograph from the file and placed it on the table in front of Barnsby.

Barnbsy's memories of the library at the dawn of time rose unchecked in his mind, a flood of images linked to the one Cornwall had placed on the table. The photo showed a hinged grey box, with a looping hieroglyphic-like scrawl in an unknown language embedded in its silver-grey metallic cover. But Barnsby knew what it meant. He knew the alien sigil represented humankind. Barnsby could still recall opening such a box in the vast silences of the library at Pnakotus to read the handwritten text within, one hundred and fifty million years before. He stood suddenly and stepped back from the table and the photograph, as if something had just startled him. His thin, glove-covered hand trembled in the air. As he noticed the tremor, Barnsby ran his hand up his face and through his hair, as if to calm his trembling fingers. He stared with wide-eyed amazement at the photo, as if it would disappear if he blinked, like he was looking at something unreal which had somehow materialized simply because of him.

"Now you see why I did not wish to involve you?"

"It's all real, isn't it?" Barnsby breathed, but Cornwall continued, unmindful of the interruption.

"Our investigation, it was...convoluted, but needless to say, our tests revealed Hutchins as a fake. He was involved in some type of cult and when we searched his home we discovered his—" Cornwall cleared his throat "—library." Another photo fell to the table: a cluttered, filthy apartment strewn with dirty cups and beer bottles, stacks of cheap magazines and stained clothing. In one corner, carefully set apart from the mundanites, a three-tiered stack of the alien volumes shoved against a peeling plaster wall. Barnsby's initial thought chilled him to the bone: They are supposed to be stacked side by side. He shook it off, silencing the voice of the dead Professor Peaslee in his mind.

"What—um. Sir. What did you find?" Barnsby felt his voice tremble as he spoke.

"In Hutchins' collection of books? Books exactly like the alien books you described in your brief? Nothing of direct use, really. Most were written in human languages using oversized characters. Some in languages we could not identify. Others were empty." Cornwall lit a cigarette and flipped through the file on the table.

"What...was in them, sir?" Barnsby sputtered, as the broken filaments of a dead man's memories played across his mind. 1945, atomic weapons, the final war. The whispers faded into the darkness of his mind as he clutched at them, leaving him with only a dim feeling of predestination, a feeling of huge creatures shaping his destiny with alien, antiseptic thoughts that he could never understand, only blindly serve.

Cornwall let out a laugh which contained no humor: "What was in them? Nothing...everything. What was there was so convoluted and strange that it made little sense. What we could understand was vague. Most of the text dealt with the past, some with the future. It seems Hutchins discerned his precognitive secrets from a volume we never found, a volume about the 1940s. At least, that is what he claimed once we had him in custody, although he would not reveal where he got the

books. He claimed he was in league with what he referred to as 'those who will come after.' He said that many people were similarly in league, but little else was discovered about his claims. And then he was gone."

"What happened to Hutchins, sir?"

"Suicide. Under...unusual circumstances. Details are unimportant. What is important is that his death ended our investigation until your brief. We could not uncover where Hutchins had come across the books. Those books we recovered were copied, cataloged, and stored. We've had occasional insights into world events through some oddly worded sentences in them, but mostly they are too vague to be of any use. But if we were to find the source of the books..." Cornwall's eyes were alight with fervor now, his fist clenched. He looked over at Barnsby and then composed himself, turning around, standing, placing his hat squarely back on his head.

"If you could find the source, no more Dunkirks, then, sir?" Barnsby's voice rose as he finished the sentence and tears stood in his eyes. Cornwall, the man he had trusted, the man responsible for the secrets of the world, had secrets of his own. Americans were dying to protect those secrets.

"Something like that, lieutenant." Cornwall's voice was far away.

"Sir, what have you done in Australia?" An incredulous whisper.

"I...we have done everything we had to do, Barnsby. For King and for country." Cornwall sniffed once and pushed his window wide. A staff car outside slipped past, its engine frantic and overwhelming in the water-heavy air. A cold wind blew in as the sun began to emerge from the low, grey clouds.

When Cornwall shut the window, an answering silence filled the room, destroying all questions before they could be asked.

CHAPTER 23:
Infinite hush in an ocean of silence

February 26, 1943: Tobin Ranges, Gibson Desert, Australia

Flame-colored pinpoints of light danced in the limitless dark. The moon had long since gone down. Now, in between, was the time of absolute night. The starlight offered little clarification except to denote the division between the horizon and the ground. Everything beneath the lip of the world was perfect black.

Everything, that is, except for the swaying, tiny lights floating out in the night, which moved slowly away from Joe Camp. Camp was crouched on a stony outcropping of rock which Mal had told him, when they set camp there that dawn, had no name. They had come more than seventy miles in two days from Lake Woolomber, across the flatlands of the Gibson Desert, traveling mostly at night to avoid the summer's heat. Joe felt good for no reason he could discern, laden with what he was sure was pilfered equipment and clutching a Sten submachine gun in the comfortable fold of his left arm. ***I am in western Australia chasing OSS agents into a desert with an aborigine,*** he thought to himself, hoping it would sound insane. Instead, it felt reassuring; it felt right. Mal leaned in close, his voice rich with the stench of tobacco, and said:

"That's them there."

The tiny lights were lanterns of people moving on the five-mile-distant Tobin Ranges. It was hard to tell how many there were; the lights would bleed into one another and sometimes suddenly spilt into half a dozen individual sources. Their movement away from Joe's position was also hard to discern in the dark, and they seemed to sway and slip over the black surface of the Earth in an almost static line. Soon enough however, one by one they disappeared into the black.

Somewhere within the mountain, Mal assured him, Peaslee and Steuben were held captive. Joe had no reason to believe the aborigine's story except for its sheer unbelievability. Who would conceive such a bizarre story to cover up some other plan? Nothing made sense. But Joe's mind kept coming back to the dead man in the hallway they had left behind—along with his sanity—at Port Hedland, an image which never failed to sober his thinking.

No matter how strange they seemed, these events were real.

Maljarna had chosen Joe two days before, from a group of more than forty of the Ngaanyatjarra's most able warriors, during some sort of ritual. Joe Camp had only the vaguest idea of what they had set out to accomplish. He knew it involved the missing OSS men, which was as much as Mal would say. Old Muluwari seemed pleased that Maljarna had chosen only a single companion for the task set before him, although the rest of the warriors seemed incredulous at the

young aborigine's selection.

After a huge meal where all his questions were deflected cleverly by Muluwari, Camp was given access to the tribe's impressive cache of weaponry, still freshly packaged in wooden crates marked with British registry stamps. The stamps were recent and the weapons were cutting edge. Submachine guns, mines, mortars, grenades, desert survival gear, all of British design. Mal refused to reveal where the weapons had come from, and old Muluwari had only said:

"The souls of those these weapons were made for are there within them still, to serve those that'll avenge them, Joe Camp."

Joe didn't quite understand why that statement made him so uncomfortable. They left the Ngaanyatjarra camp after loading up with gear that night, while the remaining warriors held heated arguments in their strange language with the old man around the fire. Women and children formed a ring around Mal and Joe Camp as they walked out of Lake Woolomber to the north. Each tribesmember reached out to touch them, fingers barely brushing them, as if the men themselves had become holy items. These events of two days previous still played in Joe Camp's mind like a surreal film, repeating over and over again in his head. It was hard to imagine something like that could really occur.

But it had, and to him, just 48 hours before.

Presently Mal leaned in again and pointing at the horizon where the lights had vanished, said, "They're out into the desert now, out to the old stones to see the Nulla. This is as good a time as any." Suddenly the aborigine was up and gone, scuttling down the far side of the rise of rocks, nothing more than an afterimage, a shadow slightly darker than the surface he tread upon. Camp rose and trotted after him, trying to keep his gear quiet, but rocks spilled to the ground in his wake. Mal watched him clumsily traverse the rise.

"Gonna have to do better than that, Joe." He chuckled, his wide mouth split in a smile.

At the base of the rise, on the flatlands of the Gibson Desert in the pitch black of night, Mal started forward at a brisk pace. Joe Camp followed as best he could, just like the last two nights on their walkabout. Like the previous nights no real movement could be discerned from their walking, except in the passing of small objects on the ground close enough to be seen in the dark. The lump of the Tobin Ranges in the distance stubbornly rode the horizon for over an hour before Camp realized abruptly, as the shadow began to loom ahead of them, that they were almost there.

The sharp rise of spiraling, fissured rock was barely visible in the pre-dawn light. The huge, squat surface of the mountain where an hour before Joe Camp had spied lanterns looked insurmountable, impenetrable, totally inhospitable to human life, but it was there now in front of them as big as life and twice as ugly. Mal hunkered down behind a meandering field of boulders and took a drink from his canteen. Camp did the same, and then leveraged himself up onto a foothold on the boulder so he could spy the range above.

He searched the surface of the immense mountain face for about fifteen seconds before he saw

it, a crack in its surface, dim light leaking out of the rock like poison from a wound.

"There," he said, and Mal smiled back at him from the dark. Surprised at his own conviction, Camp found that the nagging questions which had first entered his mind since his rescue now seemed dim and insignificant. He smiled back at Mal and the two began to close the distance to the rock.

Maybe he did have malaria after all.

There was no real way to approach the mountain while under cover. For about a hundred meters in every direction around the rock was just dead space, open ground, and they would be easy pickings if snipers were stationed anywhere nearby. The rock was laden with thousands of possible hiding places for the enemy. Since their arrival at the boulders, the sky had grown in color to a deep purple while the eastern horizon showed the dimmest whispers of indigo blue. The mountain was now a vast black shadow backlit by the growing light of the sky. It would only get lighter, and Mal silently assured Joe with a glance that waiting was not an option. They would go now.

Mal ran for the rocks which marked the edge of the mountain without regard for stealth, and arrived unscathed beneath an outcropping of huge tan spires of stone in less than a minute. Camp followed, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. The two men poked their heads up above the rocks and considered their destination. Up on the black-shadowed face of the mountain a single tiny light shone. Camp and Mal now looked at it intently. It was a cave lit from inside by something like a lantern. Shadows occasionally obscured its glow, as if people were moving about within.

"How many people do you think will be in there?" Camp whispered.

"No people up there except for your friends," Mal muttered. "All the rest are just the Nulla."

Joe Camp tried to smile but found a heaviness in his chest made it impossible. The aborigine began a slow climb up the crevice-filled surface of the mountain as the darkness bled away into the Australian dawn. Joe Camp followed like a shadow.

By the time they reached the cave, Joe knew something bad was going to happen. He could feel it hanging in the air like a stench. He shifted his .45 Colt pistol into the front of his belt and checked the slide bolt on the Sten gun. His sweaty hands searched for the best point to grip the unfamiliar submachine gun, but nothing could quiet the murmuring in his mind: ***Something bad is going to happen.***

Mal stood at the lip of the cave to one side, submachine gun pulled up to his chest, eyes wild and wide. The light in the air was growing. Joe nodded and the aborigine began to skirt slowly around into the entrance of the cave. Joe Camp followed about six feet back and a bit to the right, to keep him clear of his field of fire.

Inside the cave, strange indistinct shadows flowed across the smooth surfaces of rock.

The two men leapt around the corner of the twisting rock passage in unison, and Mal opened fire suddenly, the stubby gun jumping in his hand like an unruly animal, belching blue-white fire. Joe held his breath as his heart began to beat double time in his chest, but held his fire. He wasn't sure what he was seeing at first, but after the clatter of the noisy submachine gun died, Joe could spy two human forms within the main chamber of the cave.

A globe of scintillating crystal lit the room from the floor like some sort of huge, baroque lantern. The strange crystal drew the eye, and Joe Camp found himself wondering at the bizarre play of light within the sphere. The shadows which crawled across the cave were produced by the odd, pulsing light of the that shone through the faceted surface of the glass. Joe pulled his gaze away from the globe and scanned the cave. The two human forms in its center remained deathly still, like mannequins.

"Sorry, jumpy," Mal said, his voice resounding in the cave like an echo.

The two men within the cave, the men Mal had fired at—one plain-clothed and the other dressed in an American Army officer's uniform—looked... wrong. Not the men themselves, but their circumstances. They hung in the air like a snapshot, like they had been caught in time and frozen. The thinner of the two, the one who wore plain clothes, was caught in eternal mid-stride, with one leg ready to fall to the ground, leaning forward in a position no one could hold naturally for more than a second. The other man, in the army uniform (Camp could spy the first three letters on his name tag: P-E-A), leaned forward as well, as if he had been shoved. He was turned as if he was heading for the back of the cave when whatever happened had happened. The two hung frozen, and the fusillade of bullets that the aborigine had fired at them had apparently vanished, leaving the two strange men untouched.

"God," was all that Camp could squeeze out. All the air seemed to have left him.

Mal never even hesitated. He trotted forward into the "room," unconcerned that the impossible was occurring in front of him, and began searching among the rocks on the floor. The cave was not large, a little more than fifty square feet, covered in debris, boulders and roughly hewn walls. A stack of tin cans covered in dried filth lay in the corner, along with various bizarre artifacts: a shattered camera, portions of what looked like a carburator freshly lathered in oil, and strange grey, hinged boxes. It looked like more than a dozen men had made their home here for some time. The smell of the cave was pungent, rich with human waste.

Now only the two frozen men remained. Camp could still not bring himself to look directly at them. His eyes strained to find something else to focus on.

The wall beyond the men was fashioned from immense, time-worn blocks of sandstone, each as large as a car. Only three of the huge blocks were visible, but the edges of more bled into the cave walls, as if the cave itself had congealed around the blocks. As if the crafted stones were older than the mountain. Camp wandered into the room, submachine gun forgotten in his numb hands, and goggled at the two men stuck in time. His mind searched for purchase on new, terrible realities.

As Joe approached them, he could feel something like the pressure of deep water squeezing down on his face and in his skull. Tiny pebbles hung in the still air before his eyes, in a complex geometric pattern which reminded Joe of stars hanging in the void of space. These tiny beads, slightly shiny, floated several inches from the two men, like magic. Joe's mind reeled as he suddenly realized that the pebbles were Mal's bullets. The bullets had been frozen by whatever power had immobilized the two men. Joe lifted his hand, still five feet away from the frozen, portly man in the army uniform, and reached for one of the bullets as it hung in the air. He felt his hand slow as his fingers slipped closer to the round. The tips of his fingers began to tingle and then grow numb as he forced his hand into air as thick as jelly. Mal looked up from his task, distracted:

"Don't go near them, Joe," Mal warned, his voice full of confidence.

"What? Oh, yes." Joe stepped back, his mind blank, and followed Mal's eyes to a small, radio-like device the aborigine was fiddling with.

The box that contained it was the broken casing of a radio, as far as Joe could tell—it even had the Phillips brand name stamped into it—and a complex arrangement of mirrors had been fitted on top a bed of carefully strung wires, which were soldered to various metal plates embedded in the case. A tiny sliver of perfect red light wound its way through the maze of mirrors on the device, like a filament of fire. The entire contraption emitted a soft, nearly inaudible hum. Mal leaned in, squatting on his knees, to consider the back of the device. His hands traced connections on the machine without touching it.

"What is...that?" Joe Camp sputtered. A feeling rose in his mind like an all-encompassing denial. The facts which his senses were delivering to him were repelled by something deeper than reason, something primal inside which told him that everything he could sense here was wrong. This was not real. It could not be.

"One of the Nulla's tricks," Mal responded, lost in thought.

Camp had no reply. It was obvious the aborigine had seen such a device before, or at least had heard of such a thing. To Joe Camp it was completely alien. He had never seen the type of light that the device emitted produced by any human device, much less by one the size of a radio. A slow, crawling sensation like dread dropped into his gut when he realized that it was most likely what kept the two men suspended in air.

"How?" Camp whispered.

How? was all his brain could manage in response to the impossibilities before him. Everything Joe Camp thought he had learned—in school, in life, in the war—collapsed silently in his mind like a house of cards.

"What the hell is going on here?!" Joe Camp screamed, spittle flying from his lips. He raised the submachine gun and faced the little aborigine. His finger came dangerously close to depressing

the trigger out of sheer reflex, but something in his mind suddenly dropped away and the Sten gun clattered to the floor. He stumbled backwards, tears streaming. Mal watched silently as Joe's hands covered his face, rubbing up and down his eyes like he was trying to wipe away the things he had seen in the cave. He stumbled to the far wall, and there Joe Camp collapsed in the corner.

"Take it easy, Joe. Take it easy," Mal said.

"Something bad is going to happen," Camp whimpered.

It the vaulted silence of the cave, it sounded like a prayer.

INTERLUDE 6:
Vanished worlds are real to me today

March 14, 1943: Somewhere near Itoko, Belgian Congo

Long before the ambush, John Smith knew it had somehow been located by the council's agents. It felt the peculiar sensation of a stutter in time, a vague discontinuity in reality, like the skipping of a record, which marked the passage of minds from ancient earth to the present day. This was its first warning that its plan had been compromised. This sensation was unusual enough in itself, but when Smith felt it occur more than twelve times in a single day, as he trudged through the jungle with the humans towards Thule, it understood the severity of its situation. For the first time it understood the newfound resolve of the council, which was usually hesitant to engage in such brash acts.

This meant that likely Smith's plan had already eradicated the future, leaving a black void past the point when the ward would be compromised. Soon enough, it would prove the council's fears correct.

It was rare to risk Great Race agents in human forms in large numbers. Usually such tasks were handled by the human cult, the Motion, which the Race had fostered throughout human history. Smith did not panic. It knew the agents of the council could not possibly be tracking the human shell it currently inhabited, and it had discarded any exotic items which could be pinpointed by the powerful science of the Great Race. This was a lesson it had learned long ago and a weakness it had learned to exploit against the agents of the council, who often relied upon it. Smith had nothing of Pnakotus on its shell. That left only the humans with which it was traveling. The council had somehow learned to track one of those human companions.

Or one of the council was one of its human companions.

John Smith had remained guarded from that point onward, ready for decisive action at any moment. It had not suffered through so much in this uncivilized age to fail now.

At the first sign of disturbance, when one of the humans had detected the approach of unknown entities, Smith had left the group for the first time. Silently it crept off to the south, skirting the area of dispute by more than a mile while the sounds of the ambush played out distantly behind it, echoing beneath the vault of the canopy. The thunderous cracks of the lightning guns and the stuttering, ineffectual pops of human weapons were suddenly lost in one colossal explosion, a circumstance which Smith had not planned but which pleased it greatly. The weapon of choice of the Great Race had reacted violently with the explosive compound the humans had carried, removing the humans and the council's agents alike in one cleansing eruption.

Smith would now have to disable the ward itself. But this was no great matter.

Smith did not look back. It hurried forward through the lush jungle towards the grey city.

Thule.

When it arrived, it knew that its time here had almost ended.

Although Smith did not realize it, tears poured from its shell's eyes as it wandered the abandoned streets. It stumbled, nearly blind, to the center of the necropolis, searching for its goal. A city of Stonehenge-like rock structures built in the scale of skyscrapers, laid out in vast, ever-tightening concentric circles.

Only something of such grand size could keep the jungle at bay. The vast spires of grey rock, reared over two million years before, still remained untouched by harsh nature, which laid a quiet, constant and tireless siege to it on all sides. It was a testament to the hubris of Smith's race, the greatest project the Great Race had undertaken and its greatest secret, more vast that the library at Pnakotus or any of its millions of other forays into time. The place called Thule was the ward which kept the Great Race's only true enemy at bay, and which allowed a future into which they would construct an escape from that enemy's unavoidable release.

When the whistling horrors had risen up and consumed their world, the Great Race had fled to a future assured by their constant diligence, by visitation and alteration of history. A distant future free from the terrors of their most feared enemy—the insubstantial, immaterial, cancerous polyps they had imprisoned beneath the earth when they had first arrived here from the star of their origin. But in the interim, between the destruction of Pnakotus and the age of man, when the polyps roamed free upon the Earth, unchallenged and supreme, what had become of them? No mind of Pnakotus thought to ask such questions. Neither had Smith, until he discovered the secret buried in the sands of Australia.

The otherworldly polyps, so alien and abnormal, bred in an equally unnatural manner. It happened every four hundred million years. Gathering in an orgy of semi-solid fluid exchange, the species itself became a seething biological reactor, spewing forth new offspring to further infest the globe of the earth. They would remain in this state for hundreds of millions of years, depending on obscure celestial cycles which affected organs peculiar to their form.

The Great Race had gained this knowledge early in its time on earth, during the first great subjugation wars which led to the imprisonment of the polyps. Few knew that the polyps were subdued so easily only because many were still locked within this orgy when the Great Race arrived. These polyps, lost in some instinctual rhapsody, were easily moved underground and posed no threat while in this state. Those few that were motile and conscious were much more difficult to defeat, but the vast numbers of the Great Race proved enough to quash their initial attempts at counterattack.

All the polyps were imprisoned beneath the earth.

Even in the midst of victory, though, the members of the Great Race knew that their defeat would eventually occur. Their power to travel through time established this grim fact even before the last polyp was placed beneath the ground. The day would come when the polyps would break free of the wards of alien science the Great Race had laid to lock them within the earth. There was no way to stop the polyps, and the Great Race did not try to stop them; they understood even then that the only advantage they possessed, their ability to travel through time, was their only hope at survival.

In those eons when the polyps crawled about on the surface of the earth unchecked, after the fall of Pnakotus, no native species flourished aboveground or in the open air. The polyps ruled the dark globe and erected seamless black towers to their strange immaterial gods, and waited for the time when they could breed enough young to leave and infect other worlds and other planes.

During one of their reproductive phases, native advanced life began to flourish upon the Earth. The first creature of significant intelligence, with a brain capacity sufficient to support the mind of a member of the Great Race, was a strange and early species of ape. Native to Africa, these great apes evolved about four million years before the modern human era. It was discovered by agents of the Great Race inhabiting their clumsy forms that near the birthplace of this newly evolved race the polyps had taken to their reproductive dance in the jungles.

The polyps' only weakness was to be exploited.

Hundreds of agents of the Great Race jumped forward in time to inhabit many members of that species of ape and to turn its natural evolution to the whim of the council. Many of the Great Race's greatest minds were lost in the transference, as the brains of the ape creatures were tiny compared even to that of humanity. Few survived the transfer back when their task was completed. Those that did were little more than shadows of what they once were. These advanced minds ruled the primitive ape-people like gods.

Over two million years of evolution and endless toil in the primordial jungles of Africa, this odd species of ape, ruled by the agents of the Great Race, constructed the grey city, Thule, using the science of ancient Pnakotus. In the process, the agents of the Great Race taught the apes the arts of science and speech, and the first whispers of the belief in gods and magic began to stir among them. But the construction of the city was always the focus, for the city was in fact a device to keep the polyps in their reproductive state—a massive ward to fold the polyps into an unbreakable and infertile Mobius loop of reproduction. Within the center of the ward the polyps remained, locked in eternal orgy, never reproducing, never tiring, never leaving.

Entombed.

At the end of this great age, with the completion of the ward, the polyps were imprisoned. The remnants of the ape culture continued to develop amidst the city, slowly spreading out into the world, transforming by evolution into many different forms, one of which would prove to be the dominant species for some time in the future. The ancestral knowledge of something greater than their beginnings remained with their descendants, genetic memories of lost cities of birth; Atlantis,

Lemuria, Mu, Thule. Their antecedents, the ape-things, remained in the wilds of Africa, jealously guarding their grey city in the depths of the jungle. From this great, secret endeavor a new future rich with life unfolded upon the earth like an ever-increasing wave, erasing the black expanse of a polyp-ruled world which had once stood in its stead. This new future was free to be traveled by the Great Race and molded to the council's whim, abused by the council for their own, undeserved preservation.

But no more.

John Smith was here now, in the city which had started mankind on the path of civilization and which would end the rule of the Great Race which had exploited and plundered time itself. Smith lowered its bag to the ground and retrieved its notes in the clear light of the wonderful sun. A sun which would soon shine upon a naked, dead globe, barren of natural life and form—except for the seamless black towers and the haunting cries of the great enemy, the polyps. Without humanity to scar the world with atomic weapons, the future to which the Great Race had escaped would cease to exist.

Before him the limitless streets of Thule sprawled, carving the earth into distinct, mathematical sigils the size of city blocks, which wove a spell of eternal bliss on those cancerous things from outside. The ritual to free them would take some time, but nothing was left in the world to stop it now. Time itself was drawing to a close around John Smith and every single thing in the world, silently, like a shroud. The wave of life which Pnakotus had freed had come to its crest and would soon collapse into an everlasting tide of chaos.

CHAPTER 24:
Full of high state and woe

March 13, 1943: Somewhere near Itoko, Belgian Congo

Manbahadur Rai, the Gurkha, was not alone in the jungle. Three months in Burma had taught him what being hunted felt like. How to notice that particular nuance which circumvented the common senses but which, in the darkness of the jungle, seemed much more trustworthy than something as basic as sight. His kukri, purposely dirtied with mud, sat on his lap, clutched in the loose grip of his left hand. The strap of his Sten gun was looped in his other hand, ready to be brought to bear at any second. The tingling in Manbahadur's spine told him soon the kukri would be dirty with something other than mud.

His name was, if one were to be specific, Manbahadur Talum, and he was far, far from his home. Rai was the name of his tribe in Nepal, a clan which could count back forty-three generations of names on both sides of the Dhankuta River. It was a place so serene and alien to the filth he found himself squatting in that Manbahadur had to continuously remind himself of his location, and his mission, or the solitude he felt would carry him away in memories to Ilam and eastern Nepal, a place of green-stepped valleys and crooked hanging trees which seemed to hold the sky in place with delicate, thin branches.

Why had he ever left? The reasons seemed as unreal as the jungle which now comprised his world.

What did duty or honor mean in this mud and filth?

Even now, as the endless, humid jungle moved around him in the dark, nothing more than a sheer sheet of black, full of stealthy, suggestive sounds, he found it difficult to concentrate on particulars. His mission had somehow evaporated before his eyes, lost in a series of untoward events which had partially relieved him of the guilt that rode his shoulders like a pack so heavy even he could not heft it. Relief was what he felt for these disasters, the release of a burden worse than he had ever carried before. The Americans were his allies and had selflessly laid down their lives and safety to come to the aid of the world, unmindful of the human cost to crush tyranny. The trust between Britain and America was implicit, something unquestioned and basic. Manbahadur knew that trust alone would give him the edge he needed to complete his mission; to locate the grey city and then kill all the American agents in the group. Major Cornwall had calmly ordered their deaths like a man ordering from a menu, as if the Americans were nothing more than Axis agents, like they were nothing but animals. Now there was only one American left, and in his current condition, Manbahadur was not sure he would last the night. Fate had spared him the crimes he was ordered to commit, or so it seemed. Everyone else involved in their little excursion was dead, including his fellow PISCES agents. The explosion had been spectacular; nothing had escaped.

Nothing except Manbahadur and the American, Arnold.

But the blast had called more of their attackers from the jungle. The Gurkha had ditched his pack and hefted the unconscious American on his back, easily supporting the dead weight at a run, and headed to ground south of the blast before they were discovered by the groups of natives combing the jungle around them. He had no clear idea why he was saving the man he would have to kill later (orders, orders)—perhaps it was just his training, an unconscious reaction; the man was wounded but not dead; the automatic response was to save him at all costs so he could fight the enemy another day. On the other hand, Manbahadur figured that Arnold had pushed him down the hill for a reason, that somehow the American had one of those flashes of intuition men often have in combat and knew the composition B was in danger of detonation. Arnold had not hesitated. He'd thought of Rai before himself. Rai knew he owed the American as much again, even if they only survived to face another fate too terrible to contemplate.

As the sun fell in the sky, hidden by the canopy, Manbahadur struggled four miles through the jungle over deadfalls and through neck-high razor weeds in what seemed slow motion, a dying man on his back. Soon enough he was spent, despite his Nepalese advantages. His lungs burned and his knees shrieked as he lowered Arnold to the muddy ground. It had been a long time since he had felt such fatigue.

Darkness crept through the jungle on spider's legs, slowly consuming the world in shadow.

Now, as the growing silences of the jungle told him something was moving towards him in the black, Manbahadur looped the strap of his Sten gun around his forearm and fixed it in the crook of his elbow. Lt. Arnold hitched a strained breath in the dark that sounded thick with mucus or blood, and Manbahadur tried vainly to pierce the veil of darkness around him with more than his eyes.

Something was in the clearing with him. He had the sense of a presence, of a thing which moved through forms like fish moved through water. A spirit.

A spirit.

Manbahadur stood suddenly, sure of something he could not possibly know. The L-shaped Sten gun let out a double belch of flame, illuminating the scene in stark flare-like light for a brief moment. Four dark-skinned natives had entered the clearing invisibly, silently. Two clutched their chests in flashing stop motion afterimages, felled by the bursts. A third seemed to sprout a hooked, foot-long prong from his chest in the light of submachine gun fire before he fell. Manbahadur's Sten had misfired on the second burst, so he had thrown the kukri more than fifteen feet and it had found its mark, flying through the air with a deadly accuracy.

Silence drifted in as the jungle held its breath.

Manbahadur dropped the submachine gun to the ground and retreated into the jungle, fishing his Webley revolver and Arnold's .45 from his belt with trembling hands. He dropped in the dark past

a deadfall and brought the guns around and up, ears trained to find any sound of pursuit.

Instead, a light from the clearing illuminated the leaves and the feeling of pursuit died away.

The greenish ghost light spilled over the leaves, trailing huge, slat-like shadows behind them. Manbahadur heard the first native voice from the jungle then, but what was said he could not understand. It was a swift, organic language, mumbling and without pause. Soon, others joined the voice.

The Gurkha crept forward towards the ghost light, a gun in each hand, eyes wide with fear and desperation.

Thomas Arnold lay unconscious on the ground, surrounded on four sides by natives, who had placed some sort of box lamp on his chest. The tiny, square box flooded the area with a rich, viscous green light. The natives sang a mumbling, sing-song chant in unison, arms grasped to one another in a loose circle around the downed man.

Arnold's head lifted slowly from the ground. Arnold's eyes were wide and conscious and full of fear, searching the bizarre tableau before him for comprehension. As his shoulders began to rise off the ground, the natives roughly pinned him back down and held his arms in place with their knees. Arnold let out a muffled cry which may have contained speech. His head bobbed up and down from the ground, eerily illuminated by the green box.

Manbahadur Talum Rai cocked both pistols and took a deep breath. A hush fell over his mind. Thoughts as straightforward and clean as mathematics scrolled through his brain. Betrayal of an ally called for the ultimate penitence, he knew. And even if Arnold did not survive the situation, Manbahadur would die with a clean conscience. The American had trusted him, and Manbahadur had plotted to do his "duty." There was no excuse for such cowardice.

The Gurkha motto played over and over in his head as he rushed silently through the leaves, following the ghost light to its source. In his mind, the motto matched the sing-song chant of the natives as they performed their bizarre ritual.

It is better to die than to be a coward...It is better to die than to be a coward...It is better to die than to be a coward...

He thought of the way the river would freeze when he was a boy. The way the dogs would bark when the moon was full. His bed of straw and the winding streets of Ilam. He saw his home in shorthand, everything which made his world before all this. He saw what would make him choose to die instead of run, like a perfect clean symbol in his mind.

His gunfire ripped through the jungle like a crashing wave.

CHAPTER 25:
I saw the struggle of intellect against darkness

February 27, 1943: Tobin Ranges, Gibson Desert, Australia

Joe Camp was sure he was losing what little of his mind he had left. The sights of the last day alone were more than enough to send any man over the edge, and what little he could remember of it—there seemed to be strange gaps of memory—was filled with images and feelings which would never wholly leave his mind again. The time between Maljarna's and his entry to the cave and the present had drifted away in a haze of muttering and shouting, of incoherent responses to unreal occurrences, of Maljarna pleading with him to right himself before it all fell to pieces. Hours bled past like seconds as his mind shunted what it saw to some inner chasm, allowing stuttering bits of reality through to be confusedly considered, seemingly at random.

Joe felt the light fingers of insanity toy with the edges of his mind like a ghostly caress in the night. He felt the impossible try to fit itself in with the rest of his world-view; felt those new facts shred whatever was formerly held as reality to indistinguishable pieces with brute force; felt the pain of real knowledge as it awoke something terrible and ancient within him. This feeling within, this knowledge of real truth was as fundamental and unwavering as life itself. It was there, it had always been there, and now awakened it could not be denied—ever.

It was the truth that all beliefs besides this new and perfect terror were folly.

Joe stood and wiped his eyes again. His thin, bearded face was red with exertion and swollen from weeping. In the light of the ghostly crystal lamp he considered his blunt fingers. Scarred, callused, bruised and cut, the fingers were plain enough except for one pinky which had set badly after a football injury.

Eight years ago, his mind quietly told him, you broke your left pinky in a scrimmage at Harvard. When Danny LeVant threw you a short pass. You thought you just jammed it, but then it began to really swell. You sat out for a week. During that week your father died. During that week—

Startled, Joe Camp suddenly, for the first time in over a day, focused on the ancient cave, his vision blurry with tears. He found himself lying against the wall kitty-corner from the alien machine he had seen Maljarna examining. The device was silent and the thin sliver of light it had emitted was gone. Joe's hands hung before his head like an exhibit, like they were not attached to his body at all, but were placed there on display by some unseen force; like Joe could walk away and the hands would remain behind. Distant neurons fired and the hands obediently spun themselves so his palms were turned away from him. The huge knuckles were wrinkled and knobby. The fingernails were thick with red dirt.

Camp realized his mouth was hanging open, and slowly shut it. He was in western Australia. Lives were at stake. The madness receded like the tide and training filled the void.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

Struggling away, Camp pushed himself roughly away from the hand, stumbling up on his numb legs; they felt as rickety as stilts until he met the unyielding surface of the cave wall with a flat palm, out of breath. Reluctantly, he turned to face his attacker. The man who had grabbed him, not unkindly, considered him with small black eyes and a careful expression on his plump face. It took seconds for Camp to realize that the man was Wingate Peaslee, one of the men he had seen encased in...

...in the bubble of slow time.

The other man, Steuben, was gone. The thought felt like a rough bump in a car with a bad suspension. It took his brain several seconds to refocus.

"Camp, can you hear me?" Peaslee spoke in a quiet, nasal voice.

"Yes."

"Good. Good." Peaslee shot a nervous glance over his shoulder at the mouth of the cave, which Joe suddenly realized was glowing with the light of mid-day. Heat, unnoticed before, hung heavy in the dark. ***How long was I out?*** Camp thought to himself, and struggled to regain his composure.

"What...where's Maljarna and...Steuben?" Camp sputtered, glancing around the empty cave.

"How much do you know about all this?" Peaslee replied, eyes wide and probing. The man was built like a fireplug, snugly encased in his Army uniform, filthy with Australian red dust.

"Not...much," Camp replied, stooping to retrieve his Sten gun from the floor where it had been carefully placed along with his pack and gear. Peaslee made no move to stop him. He had no recollection of anyone removing it from his person.

"Your friend, the aborigine, headed out to the...library. He wrote you off. He and Steuben left two hours before dawn this morning."

"Why didn't they—"

"We're to eliminate any of those things that return here," Peaslee replied, cutting Joe off.

"What?"

"The others, the things from the library. They get into people. Take them over. Now they know. They know about DELTA GREEN, about everything. It was all true, all along. I saw it." Peaslee's

dark eyes held secrets behind them, like a poorly constructed dam bulging with rushing water.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, really. But I was there, in the past. They took me. I saw...them. I ***was*** them."

Camp's mind tried to encompass all the facts which suddenly assaulted his mind, and failed. Nothing made any sense. Perhaps he had gone mad. If it were so, nothing he did mattered anyway. What could you do but comply when your mind turned against you?

"I have to go after them." Joe stood and slung his pack over his shoulder. He checked the web belt for magazines, looped it over his shoulder, cross-strapped the Sten around his sickly chest (had friends once called him barrel chested?) and searched several bags for rations. Finding them, he stood and faced Peaslee, whose eyes held indifference.

"No. We have to wait," Peaslee offered serenely, but made no move to stop him.

"Why?"

"They told me to. They knew all this. When I was there, back there...back then, they told me to wait two days after I was released. I would...see something then. They told me not to go out to the site in the desert. They said something...bad...was going to happen. They said they had to...correct something. Change something near a...crux. It doesn't make any sense, I know..."

Camp trotted out of the cave into the boiling sun before Peaslee could react. The little man did not pursue and Joe didn't look back. He skittered down the face of the mountain in a barely controlled fall. Joe headed off into the desert to the north, towards where the lanterns had gone before. Across the sea of rock and sand, out in the wastes, where old Muluwari claimed the Nulla made its home in the earth.

Joe Camp found belief and fear fluttering in his chest, which had held only cold, hard, dead facts before. These new feelings intertwined to form some perfect basis of will, which moved him forward despite the heat. He stumbled north into the desert like a madman. Or a corpse.

From the safety of the lip of the cave, Wingate Peaslee watched with near sunblind eyes as Joe Camp became a dwindling dot on the northern horizon. A shifting black speck in a sea of bright grey and tan.

"Just like they said he would," he mumbled to himself, and turned to the coolness of the black.

CHAPTER 26:
Dull to the betrayal of their own decay

March 1, 1943: London, U.K.

"What's the word on the teams?" Wild Bill demanded, slamming the tiny humidor shut with a beefy, squat-fingered hand. Martin Cook had just entered with a clutch of papers. The fat man waddled around the desk slowly.

"No word yet, Bill," Cook replied blank-faced, as he sank into the comfort of his favorite chair. Behind him, dim rays of sunlight poured through the cracks in the sandbag-filled window.

"Cornwall shucked us, Martin. We've been screwed." Donovan leaned forward in the chair and placed both hands on his head. From outside the din of traffic could be heard. The two old men sat for a time in silence and then Cook leaned forward.

"I don't think that's the case, sir."

"Why's that?" Donovan did not look up, only slicked his hair back with the flat of his palm while looking at the floor.

"We have indications from the other British sections that PISCES has lost its team in Australia as well," Cook stated plainly.

"What?" Donovan glanced up for the first time in minutes.

"Menzies informed us less than a day ago that Cornwall had called on him for some men. To go to Australia. To perform a certain task Menzies would not detail."

"This is in addition to the PISCES men Menzies informed us were traveling to Darwin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank God Menzies has some sense of honor. Shit. If we only had that information sooner!" Donovan continued his vigil, head downcast, elbows on his knees, eyes searching the fantastic patterns on the Indian rug.

"Whatever happened, happened to both teams, PISCES and us, sir. Regardless of motive, we are up against something which knows exactly what is going on and what is going to happen—before we do." Cook spun his chair and looked at the imposing mass of sandbags at his window.

“Yeah. You’re right. This can either be divisive, or bring the groups together...“

“Our new crop of freshly debriefed men for the DG unit are on their way here. We just got word on that too.”

“Who the hell’s left to debrief them?” Donovan laughed.

Cook spun his chair back. “Stillman, the wounded one, sir? The specialist from the second raid?”

“Oh yeah, Stillman. He’s back in the States then?”

“Yes, sir, in Virginia. Teaching.”

Donovan looked up and then at his hands. “More men,” he said hollowly. “This DELTA GREEN thing got out of hand pretty damn fast.”

“Yes, sir.”

The clock chimed and both men looked up at its silver face, marveling at the low, perfect sound it produced. When Cook looked back, Donovan was looking towards the shelves. His eyes were far away.

“The worst thing is, everyone thinks I have only one war to worry about. The fucking Axis is the least of my problems, believe me. But then why am I tellin’ you this? You know what I mean. Me, the president, you, Churchill, Cornwall the smart bastard, we’re all doing triple duty here.”

“This is so different from the first operation with the division,” Cook said sadly.

“You mean the seaside raid with P-Division? What was that, 1928?” Donovan lifted a questioning glance.

“Yes, sir. That one. Innsmouth. It all was so clear then.” Cook spun his chair back and stood, walked to a cabinet and began to fix himself a drink. Donovan turned down the silent offer of a drink with a swift shake of the head.

“What was so different?” Donovan mumbled as Cook dropped ice into a dirtied, empty glass.

Cook drank three quarters of the amber liquid in his glass before answering. His jowls shook as he coughed out his answer.

“They weren’t...human. They weren’t even near human. It was...simple to see them...to kill them.”

“That made it easy?”

“No. That made it hard. What made it easy was that it was obvious—even the most wet-behind-the-ears Marine could see it. It was us or them. Now—” Cook gestured vaguely, indicating the uncertain world, drained the rest of his glass and poured another. “What are we going to do?”

“What can we do?” Donovan glanced up, eyes expectant and needy. “Jesus.”

“Pray?” Cook replied, startled by the look of despair in Donovan’s eyes.

“To what?” Donovan spat out and stood.

“We can still hope...right?” Cook countered. Donovan stood still for a time while Cook sipped from his second glass.

“We can still do that, thank God.” Donovan returned, his raised face flush with anger.

“It’s all out of our hands now, anyway,” Cook wheezed.

“Yeah, but whose hands is it in?”

The phone began to ring. Cook lifted the receiver in his thick hands and listened for a moment.

“Three of our men came out of the desert yesterday,” he said.

“Good boys,” Donovan whispered, his eyes far away.

CHAPTER 27:
Uncertain shapes, visitors from the past

March 14, 1943: Somewhere near Itoko, Belgian Congo

A field of trees. Golden, thin. Standing in rows like a picket fence erected by nature. They rose up from the cold, marshy embankment on the far side of the river, distant. Behind them, the face of the mountain crawled up, spattered here and there by drifts of snow, imposing and as big as the sky itself. The air was rich with the smell of coming snow. A cold wind passed down the valley.

In the river, a reflection of the trees and the mountain hung, rippling gently in the early morning breeze, catching the golden colors of the sun as it rebounded off the world.

On the river was a boat, small, L-shaped and red, a vivid color, so that it stood out on the water despite its distance. A boy and an old man sat in the boat. In the water, a reflection of the boy and the old man sat in the reflection of the boat.

Manbahadur Rai was that boy.

His grandfather sat across from him on the rickety red boat. Dilprasad Rai, the old man, spoke suddenly. Manbahadur looked up, startled. The boat rocked, sending a million reverberating ripples out into the river, intersecting and changing until the trees and sky disappeared from the surface, lost momentarily in the confusion.

“I am sorry, grandfather, I did not hear you.”

His grandfather smiled toothlessly and wagged a crooked finger at him.

“You have not learned much in life, have you?” the old man chided.

Manbahadur simply stared at his grandfather politely, waiting for the old man to continue. Anything else, he knew, would be disrespectful.

“I was saying that you are having a hallucination. You are in a jungle in a place called —‘Congo’? You should wake up now.”

The world leapt back to him like a nightmare.

Manbahadur Rai lay on his side in the damp heat of the oppressive jungle. It was still night. Which night, he did not know. The smell of seared meat hung in the still air, with the foul stench of burned cotton, cordite, and shit rounding out the scene. Somewhere nearby in the dark, someone

was hitching thick, liquid breaths. Memory crept back as Rai attempted to gain some semblance of order in his jumbled mind.

He had leapt into the clearing to dispatch the natives who had pinned Lieutenant Arnold to the ground. He had shot two of them nearly point blank as they crouched on the semi-conscious American. One he had shot in the head with the Webley, the other in the chest with the .45. The last native had produced an odd, silver cylinder before Rai could get a bead on him.

Something had happened then. Something bad which he could not remember.

Rai shifted his weight and rolled onto his shoulder. Sharp, perfect pain ripped through his arm as he placed his hand down to facilitate his movement. Sweating and struggling to regain his breath, Rai lay still for some time, listening. He heard what he now knew to be the native he had shot in the chest take his last few breaths, slowly drowning in his own blood. Hardly any time had passed, it seemed. Rai carefully tested his legs, which responded weakly to his commands. He slowly shifted himself back towards the knobby roots of a huge tree, pushing with his thick-heeled boots against any purchase his feet could find in the dark. Slowly, straining with effort, Rai propped himself up in a sitting position with his back against the bark of a tree. His breath came in ragged gasps and his heart rang in his chest like a jackhammer.

Time passed.

Rai noticed the dawn as it slowly insisted itself upon the land. A slight shift in the dark, from perfect black to a thin, navy blue and then to a hazy glow of white which seemed only to gather near the ground. The jungle glowed all around them, crouched and ready to spring like some creature.

Three dead natives lay in the clearing. One, spread eagle near a tree, had a near perfect hole through his face, like an apple which had been cored. A second lay on his back peacefully, one arm lazily draped across his chest, a chest which was no longer heaving, thanks to the neat hole punched through it. The third native was a mess; his face and chest had been seared by some sort of flame, and his black skin had been charred to a barbecue-like crustiness. His lower jaw was gone, removed violently in what looked like a shrapnel wound.

In the fight, Rai could recall the third native retreating back a dozen or more steps from Arnold, lifting a silver cylinder from the floor of the jungle and turning to face him, his face lit by the sickly green glow of the strange lamp. Then, nothing.

“Where is the lamp now?” Rai mumbled to himself, surprised at the weakness in his own voice.

Lieutenant Arnold was not in the clearing and neither was the odd, glowing box the natives had placed on his chest. As the light of the morning became more pronounced, Rai could spy footprints from the center of the clearing, heading off in the muddy earth to the northeast. Bootprints.

Arnold was gone.

Rai lifted his right hand slowly, already half-knowing what he would see there. He did not scream when the ruined hand came into view. All but two fingers had been blown from it, and the skin, once a clear brown, had been burned to a deep black, split in places to reveal a meaty, sickly red. He knew without looking that the other hand was in a similar state.

The native had...shot him with the silver cylinder somehow. It was some sort of electrical device. Rai recalled the gunpowder in the unused rounds in his pistols igniting as the electricity flowed through him. Now, suddenly, Rai could recall the entire incident as if he had observed it from outside himself.

He had charged the third man, bringing his guns to bear on him, and the native had scuttled away from the center of the clearing, fumbling for a long, thin, silver tube which the native brought forward in a sloppy hold beneath his arm like a folded umbrella. Rai raised both pistols to fire and the flash happened. His Webley was the first to explode, ripping his right hand to shreds and leaping from his grip like something alive. Fragments of the barrel shot forward into the neck of the native, cleaving through it. Rai's fingers were thrown into the air by the force of the blast like party favors. The pain shot through him, head to toe, and began to throb into his mind, erasing all thought within it.

Then the .45 went, a terrible explosion, tearing into his arm and hand suddenly, just as the pain of the first wound was fading beneath shock. The explosion, which sounded like a harsh, short cough, sent a lick of belching flame forward to the native's head as he goggled at the blood pouring from his neck in a fatal spray. The fire licked the native's face and eyes and he collapsed backwards, writhing on the ground. The blast had shot forward, and not back—otherwise Rai would be dead as well.

Rai fell too, but could not recall his body finding the ground. He had lain unconscious for minutes or hours. There was no way to be sure, but the light had come and he had survived the night. He could see what he had accomplished.

Directly in front of his eyes, the bootmarks led off to the northeast, towards the city.

The natives all were barefooted.

Arnold had made it!

Rai felt an ebb of energy enter him. The feeling of completing some great task filled him. The feeling of returning from a nearly endless journey. This warm glow surrounded his body and permeated him, until the pain in his hands was nothing more than a numbness—at least for a moment. His need to right the situation had proven more fruitful than he could have imagined. Despite his wounds, Rai could not stop smiling.

An hour passed with him lying still, propped up on a tangle of roots, ruined hands resting on his blood-soaked lap, a smile lighting his round face.

Finally, with a grunt and slight shift, Rai pulled one leg beneath himself and slowly, with great effort, stood. The world rocked and swayed in front of him, but he somehow, through some amazing force of will, maintained his balance.

First some morphine from the medical kit, he thought, then back to the Lomela River for whatever equipment he could carry in his state, then on to Itoko and what passed for civilization in the Congo.

His wounds could not stop him now; he had things to do. If he didn't make it back, who would tell the Americans their man was on his way to somehow complete his mission?

He could not stop smiling.

"I have learned much, grandfather, so much..." the little Gurkha mumbled, and plodded off into the jungle to the southwest in a morphine haze.

INTERLUDE 7:
A song for the last act

March 14, 1943: Somewhere near Itoko, Belgian Congo

John Smith crouched over the sigil it had spent the last five hours drafting in chalk. Intricate curves, parallels, squares, ellipses and circles contained within a single enormous oval, rendered with exacting care in the exact center of the grey city. The alien science it represented was eons beyond modern man, and yet had been perfected millions of years before man's rise to prominence. The lines seemed to float above the dark, grey stone and push out at its borders, shrinking and growing depending on which direction they were observed from.

Smith squatted in front of it like a toad, considering the interrelationships of the thousands of intersections of lines. The proportional relationship of the circles to the squares. The way the looping ellipse of the edge made the stone it was drawn upon seem almost warped. With nothing but chalk lines on rock Smith had changed space itself—a simple enough task for a creature native to the dimension of time. Time was the element here, and it could be shifted by changing space, for the two were interwoven. Here below the city, time was so warped that it looped back upon itself. Beneath the great ward, which is what the grey city truly was, time did not proceed and the Great Enemy was entombed forever in the bowels of the Earth.

John Smith knew how to restore time here to its natural rhythm. It had spent years in this wild era perfecting the complicated art. It had suffered through countless discomforts, misunderstandings and, above all, immense loneliness for its own kind. The human "civilization," which did not even begin to touch upon the perfection of Pnakotus, was traumatic to experience even in limited doses. It was nothing more than a million mistaken biological paths leading only to chaos, despite all its attempts to organize itself into patterns resembling the orders of the past. The human feeling of "morality," the endless struggle for some perfection which the humans knew could never come—this order was embedded in the very fabric of creation. Humans cities imitated Pnakotus, imitated its art and science and morality, but this was nothing more than genetic memory, protein recollections of a time when man was a more base and wild creature ruled by beings native to time. Ruled by the Great Race. The dim stirrings of gods, magic, and morality all came from this place in the Congo, from the city, from the white apes which would lead to mankind.

Still, the nature of perfection is, by necessity, stagnant. And anything was better than a frozen, never-ending order. Even chaos, in its own way, was beautiful.

It stood and the noise of its shuffling feet reflected back at Smith off the endless stone faces, drawing its attention up from the sigil. When the noise died, behind those fading echoes, another sound was dancing down those same corridors of stone. More distant, but more distinct.

At first it thought perhaps the phantom noise was a trick of acoustics, but then Smith clearly heard the voice.

"Doctor!" The voice echoed down the stone streets, playing off a million different surfaces, reflecting back, growing and diminishing in power. It was the voice of the human, Thomas Arnold. Smith considered its options. Soon enough it would have to begin the noisy ritual, which would certainly draw the human to the location of the sigil. There was no way to complete the necessary ritual without attracting attention, and then... Physically, the shell Smith inhabited was no match for Arnold, and Smith had shed all advanced technology some time before in order to elude its pursuers, so it was also no match for Arnold's primitive weaponry.

But why would the human search for Smith in such a manner? Why not stalk the streets silently until it came upon the alien? Because, most likely, Arnold had no idea that Smith was an alien. Arnold was at a supreme disadvantage.

Smith decided it could conceal its intentions by going to Arnold and dispatching him after had it gained his trust.

Smith followed the voice up the vast, canyon-like streets of the ancient necropolis. He came upon Arnold standing in an intersection of streets, next to a small series of ascending pillars. Arnold's back was to a pyramid which dwarfed all human attempts to imitate it. It was obvious Arnold was injured, but Smith knew little of human anatomy. Blood had been drawn and had dried on Arnold's shoulder, staining his ripped khaki shirt a deep crusty purple, but what did this mean? Smith had never been injured in human form before. Would Arnold perish on his own, without assistance? Or was the dried blood a sign that his body would heal from its injury?

Smith did not know.

What it did know was that it had no chance in a direct confrontation with such a creature as Arnold, a human trained extensively to kill other humans. It would have to rely on subterfuge.

Arnold held nothing except the same chemical emulsion camera he had carried on the flight across the ocean. Smith was quite familiar with these devices. In Darwin, Smith had used them to document many of the books from the library of Pnakotus, rather than taking the books with him, since that would have allowed the assassins to track its progress.

Smith could see no weapons on Arnold, just a small hip pouch which was too restrictive to carry anything offensive. Then, as Arnold turned, still searching for Smith, preparing to shout again, Smith saw the knife on the human's belt.

"Doctor!?" The voice echoed down the abandoned streets.

A knife was a simple cutting implement with which Smith was familiar in the most basic sense. Humans were vulnerable to such instruments. Poor evolution had lead to an upright, bipedal stature, exposing organs to assault. Such an instrument could prove useful in close quarters.

A plan began to form in Smith's mind.

"I am here, Lieutenant Arnold," Smith shouted back, watching Arnold spin around suddenly to locate its voice.

Arnold's face held little emotion. "Doctor. I was concerned. We were separated during the... assault." The human held his hands out in an odd gesture. It was the most Arnold had ever said to Smith.

Smith flexed his mouth muscles, imitating the human custom of smiling, and showed his empty hands. Arnold trotted over to Smith and stopped, considering it from top to bottom. What a foolish custom, smiling, baring one's teeth to show good nature. Idiocy. Random genetic lunacy.

"You are uninjured?" Arnold asked quietly, glancing over Smith's shoulder.

"Yes." Smith replied smugly.

The distant sounds of the jungle played in the empty streets.

"Lieutenant Arnold, perhaps we can use you chemical emulsion camera to record this moment in time."

Some unrecognizable emotion played across Arnold's face for a brief second. Smith could not even be sure it had even seen the slight change in Arnold's countenance. Then Arnold fiddled with the camera for a moment, and smiled blandly at Smith.

"No one else from the...group survived, then?" Arnold asked, his voice empty of emotion.

"No. I am the last. The explosives are lost as well."

"Let's take the photograph," Arnold muttered, placing the camera on a stump-like stone pillar which rose to his chest in height. As Arnold turned his back to adjust the camera, Smith's eyes played greedily across the hilt of his knife.

Arnold returned to pose next to Smith. The two men stood with their backs against the wall of an immense stone pyramid which rose hundreds of feet into the air. A clicking sound, like a timer, could be heard chattering away from the camera box.

Smith's right hand slowly began to shift towards Arnold's belt.

The alien saw too late the oddity in the camera, something it never had the chance to look at closely before. The lens of the device was a strange, luminescent green. Smith's hand froze inches from the hilt of the knife.

Like a snake striking, Arnold's hands clamped down with frightening strength on Smith's right wrist, then his left. The smaller, older Smith struggled vainly in Arnold's grip, but the two men shifted slightly in front of the camera as it continued to click away seconds.

"It is not a real camera device! It is a trap!" Smith shrieked. Inside its mind a million ideas meshed into one overriding fear. It would be gone. Its mind would be gone from all time, and its mission would be left uncompleted.

"I know," the thing in Arnold's body replied evenly. "I constructed it." Smith locked eyes with the assassin, seeing through the human shell for the first time. Although the alien did not know it, its human face contorted into a mask of rage.

"You," Smith breathed.

"Yes. We have finally returned for you."

A bright, white flash flared for the briefest moment.

Nothing remained of the two men after the flash, nothing but the tiny, camera-like device. It let out a small click, a hum, and then was silent, perched on the pillar like an artifact left on display in some bizarre outdoor museum.

As on a billion other days in the city where man was born, silence filled the avenues, and the animals which had learned to shun its streets continued their vigil in the jungles that crouched around the stones like a dense, green fog.

CHAPTER 28:
So even Hell has laws?

March 13, 1943: Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

As his vision and mind cleared, what Arnold first took for a ruined and cracked sky—some vast and crumbling firmament of heaven—turned out to be a fractured and fissured plaster ceiling, its white paint fading to sickly yellow with age and cigarette smoke. As his mind cleared enough to focus, something about the scale seemed wrong. The ceiling hung above him unnaturally, like an omen.

The ceiling was immense. It went on and on. Portions of it, water-soaked and crumbling, had sagged, revealing between the fissures the rib-work of the floor above.

Something very bad had occurred. An explosion—he recalled that much. A jungle. Natives hunting him in the jungle.

The ceiling looked down on him with indifference. He could smell the acrid aroma of burning cardboard and the thin, clear stench of heated plastic in the freezing air. They were not the smells he expected. He expected either the hospital or the jungle; ammonia and sulfur or plants and dung, not burning plastic and cardboard and a giant's room.

Thomas Arnold sat up. He found himself in a tremendous bed which shrieked as he moved, the springs inside the thin padding crying out like an insane chorus of birds. His legs were shrouded beneath a ragged and stained sheet, which may have once been white but had seen so much use that it was covered in various organic blotches which almost looked deliberate. He felt very strange, almost uncomfortable. But even that was not the right word. He had no pain, no apparent wounds he could feel.

Still, something was wrong.

The ceiling hung at least twelve feet above the floor of what appeared to be a bedroom in some type of tenement building. A door, normal in all aspects except its massive size, stood opposite him. The door, at least nine feet tall, was open a sliver, revealing a rich, yellow light from the room beyond. The bed, the door, the ceiling, even the windows which hung behind his head were terribly out of scale. Everything was built for a giant.

Footsteps interrupted his reverie.

A gigantic, swarthy-skinned man, nothing more than a backlit shadow broken by glinty eyes and a ring-filled hand, stood at the crack of the door, which to the giant seemed to be normally

proportioned. The stranger's eyes shifted over Arnold momentarily and then he was gone, transformed to rapidly diminishing footsteps on old wood floors. A distant door slammed; a galloping sound of feet taking a series of steps two at a time from some far-removed stairwell.

Another distant door, somewhere below in Arnold's nightmare, slammed shut.

He could feel the emptiness of the apartment. His breath flowed out in white plumes. Something about the prickling of his skin, the way his hair stood on end, the perfect and creamy white complexion of his arms resounded in his mind like a warning.

Something was wrong.

He wore no rings. His class rings were gone. His fingers looked plump, short, and held no deep creases, as if he had been in bed a long time and they had softened by the long convalescence—but his mind whispered to him that this was not the case. A coma, then? Something else about his hands were very wrong. Best not to think about it.

His feet found the freezing wood of the floor. The room was even bigger than he had imagined from his perch on the bed. The ceiling hung above him like the sky. Before him, at least thirty feet away, was the giant's door, still ajar. A faint bit of music played from the other room. Arnold crept forward, coaxing a million different creaks and groans from the unusually thick and long planks on the floor.

Arnold slid the door open, pulling on the rusted knob with both, baby-smooth hands. He had to reach slightly up to do so. As the door swung wide to reveal the other room, Arnold held his breath.

Light flooded in from two immense, cracked windows, illuminating another huge room. As Arnold shuffled in and could see more clearly, the light sparkled off a million fragmented pieces of metal, glass and bits of mirror scattered on the floor. Outside the window, lost in the sun, was the facade of another tenement.

Arnold shuffled into the room. Some huge machine, like the inner workings of a Phillips radio, had been smashed beyond repair in the center of the room and spread about evenly. The destruction had occurred with great care, it seemed, reminding Arnold of his OSS training on how to destroy radios and code-books to avoid their capture. It was the room's only feature except for an overturned table. From the room beyond, perhaps the next door neighbor's, a radio played quietly. The male voice, thick and resonant and resoundingly controlled, trilled through the wall:

You must remember this:
A kiss is still a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The sentimental things apply, as time goes by

He had never heard the song before.

As he moved forward, complex patterns of light rose from the wreckage on the floor, reflections off the debris spiraling in the air, distorting the room, giving him a feeling of disjointedness, adding to the dreamlike sensation which already permeated the scene. His breath leapt out of him, rising in the sunlight like steam, when he was no longer able to hold it in. He had nearly forgotten he was holding it at all.

Arnold stood near the edge of the debris, poised in the sunlight, naked and afraid. Afraid of something he already somehow knew. Afraid of something. Some fact which was already in his mind but which he could not see, would not see.

Thomas Arnold looked down on a hundred upturned pieces of shattered mirror which lay among the detritus.

A hundred reflections of the serene, blameless face of an eight-year-old boy looked back at him.

He began to scream.

CHAPTER 29:
I crave for death, I long for rest

February 28, 1943: Tobin Ranges, Gibson Desert, Australia

Night fell on the western desert and Joe Camp fell with it. It was seven and a half hours since his departure from the safety of the cave and he now understood the severe mistake he'd made venturing out in the blazing Australian sun. An hour into his march, all the strength had left his limbs, leaving him a stumbling stick-figure in an endless sea of red-brown dunes. His lips were cracked, his eyes were sunblind and his water was nearly gone. Half caught up in some mad, internal monologue, he noted his knees giving way like a man marking time, simply watching for some only marginally interesting event—in this case, the end of his life. There was no pain. In fact there was no sensation at all when he hit the sand. His body was a numb appendage, a ragged waste of rapidly dwindling liquids which would surely be used up after tonight.

The cool darkness swept over him like a drug, lulling him into a dull stupor. Unmoving. Paralyzed.

Then—the light.

In the distance a dancing, ghostly light, red, green and purple, appeared in the darkness like a storm of color on the lip of the world. Camp found his feet slowly, first stumbling up to his hands and knees and then to a swaying, crouch as the world rocked and tilted around him. The light still shone in the dark, a beacon, drawing him forward to the edge of the map, the place where the cartographer might mark "here there be dragons." The light was mesmerizing. It drew him, unmindful of danger, like he was being tugged forward on an invisible tether.

He staggered ahead, attempting to keep the light in his field of vision, his feet sinking into the greedy sand as soft dunes pulled on his boots, sucking them in to trip him. Twice he fell to his hands and knees; once he sank up to his wrists in the sand. The sand beneath him was lit by the sky and the ghost-light like snow in the moonlight. Golden, blue and red motes of solid color winked in and out as they caught the light like tiny mirrors.

Squinting and raising his head from the sand, Joe Camp focused his stinging eyes as well as he could on the distant light and saw shadows passing before them. Blurry man-shapes flitted back and forth, backlit by the brilliance of the blaze on the horizon. The light was real. It was there, an actual thing in the dark, not some figment of his thirst and exhaustion.

He fumbled with his canteen and drank the rest of his water in one long gulp. It was a gamble, but he would not make it to the light without more water, and even if it proved to be just as dry as the rest of the desert, so what? At least he would see it, whatever it was, before he was gone. What

little energy he had left swelled within him as he drank, and the warm water assuaged some deep demand of his body which had kept him in a daze. Joe Camp stood and started forward once more, his feet rising and falling in an odd, loose rhythm.

The light winked at him from the dark, drawing him in like the embrace of an old friend.

Huge blocks of sandstone were lit in stark highlights by the light ahead. Camp could make out little on their black, shadowed surfaces except that they were wind-eaten and rough. Once perfectly carved and solid, he was sure, each was as large as a tank. They were spread about on the dunes like the immense wood blocks of some unimaginably huge child. It looked like someone had blown up a pyramid the size of Giza, and these rocks were the detritus from the horrific explosion.

He chews the stones of the earth for his food, those 'at are too hard, he spits them out. Old Muluwari's voice giggled in the dark and Camp leaned against a stone for support, squinting ahead into the dark. He was here to see the Nulla now. Steuben and Peaslee were on their own; the OSS could look out for itself. The war was like some distant thing he had read of in a book once. He was here to see the Nulla. He was here to learn the truth about the world.

Through an immense thoroughfare of sand-blasted, randomly scattered rocks, over rolling red-brown dunes in the dark, the light stood out prominently on the hill ahead, like a colorful star fallen to earth, still sputtering. Closer than before. Much closer.

Without knowing why, exhausted and scarecrow-thin, Joe Camp began to run towards it.

The amorphous light, rich in colors too varying and fleeting to be individually identified by Camp's wonder-filled eyes, swirled like a silent storm on the crest of the hill. It cast harsh, piercing highlights on the destroyed masonry and on Camp's face, illuminating the Australian desert with an eerie, stop-motion flicker. But the light cycled too rapidly for the darkness to take hold even for a moment.

Camp watched in gape-jawed bewilderment as the silent spectacle continued before him.

There was nothing really to be done. He had no illusions about his chances. His weaponry was pathetic if he was up against something with access to the technology he had seen in the cave, and he would never survive a return trip through the desert. His choices had been made long ago. He was in free-fall now. He had been ever since he had been rescued in Port Hedland. All he could

choose now was his point of impact.

The Nulla was here, it was waiting, and Camp could feel it. He had been drawn here, across time, through circumstance to the very edge of human knowledge. Would he falter now?

Unfamiliar shadows flickered within the light, calling to him, suggesting shapes of things never before seen by human eyes, promising eternity.

Joe Camp dropped his gear and weapon in the sand and began to climb the hill.

"Joe," the voice said from the light.

"Yes," Camp replied, his eyes clenched, a waver in his voice. An indistinct shadow was visible, barely, in the halo of light as Camp slowly inched forward up the sandy incline.

"I have waited a long time for you," it said.

Joe Camp recognized the voice. He entered the light.

The light died with a click and faded to a dull, light green pearlescence which illuminated a small dome around the crest of the hill. Maljarna, the aborigine, stood next to a half-destroyed masonry block which had become an impromptu table. On top of it sat a huge, baroque bronze and steel machine. The machine was composed of mirrors, rods and pistons which swung and spun in complex patterns which were, now that the machine was shut down, slowly spinning to a halt. The undersea-green glow bled out from the interior of the device and illuminated Maljarna's squat, broad face in a strange way. The aborigine's eyes glowed a luminescent yellow, his teeth a deep green. The man smiled as he saw Joe approach. He held out his empty hands and beckoned the American closer.

"Joe. My time here has almost ended. I must return home now," Maljarna said, his face showing a nearly imperceptible sadness which played across his features like an afterthought. "It will be sad. I will miss this place. This time. This form. Your kind is far more giving, beautiful and intelligent than most of my race believe. I will do my best to teach them of these things."

"Where's home, Mal?" Joe mumbled, but something in him already knew.

Camp stood next to Maljarna and clasped the aborigine's hand in his own. Goodness bled out

of him like a wave. Camp tried to smile, tried to be reassuring, but found his mind wandering. Their eyes locked.

"Before all this. I will show you." Mal gestured to the ruins strewn across the desert. "Touch the machine."

Joe Camp reached forward with trembling hands. It was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life.

The light rushed in, pushing all distinction out of Camp's mind. All was lost in a blinding warmth, in a perfect, clear white light. Camp shut his eyes against it, but the insistent beams pierced through his lids directly into his mind. There was too much coming in. Too much light. Camp buckled at the knees, or imagined he did; he could no longer feel the ground or the gentle wind. Everything was the light.

Silent. Total.

Then sounds. The rising and falling buzz of crickets and less recognizable insects. Distant whines of machinery. Sonorous bleats like those produced by elephants. The wind whistling through high peaks. The cooling wind, rich with the smell of salt water and other, more subtle odors.

Despite the glare Joe Camp forced his eyes open to an alien land couched in a warm, summer night.

The piercing light was gone, like it had never been there at all, and Camp stared in wonder at the world as it had been before.

A gigantic city-scape unfurled before him, lit here and there by small white and yellow lights. The immense buildings, many of which were constructed like ziggurats, with dozens of levels rich with hanging gardens and verandahs filled with exotic plants, stretched to the edge of vision and rose to monstrous heights. The furthest looked like distant mathematical peaks, like a scientific imitation of geology. This pattern of imitating nature continued with canyons of light which were strung beneath these structures, huge roads for unguessable machines to traverse. Then, as Joe Camp watched, a machine of silver and bronze, larger than a city bus, shot down the thoroughfare faster than a fighter plane. It was gone in seconds, too quickly for Camp to spot any crew or its method of propulsion.

The stones which made up the foundation of the building he stood on matched, at least basically in size, those ruined blocks he had seen in the desert. Everything about the scene was absolutely real. He was actually on a verandah in some alien city. Tears filled Joe Camp's eyes and his knees

buckled.

Through the tears Camp looked to the too-bright night sky, which held incomprehensible patterns of alien stars. In a thousand million years the stars would find the positions of his youth, and once again he would be able to find his way by them. The pattern above was like a complex dance through which a billion suns kept time. It was all so simple. The universe was a clock. A countdown to the world as he knew it. The world after.

"This is my home," Maljarna said to him, and the ruined blocks of the desert faded back in around Joe Camp suddenly. The two men stood once more among the ruins, in the world after.

"I have been here, awaiting this moment, for more time than you can imagine. My kind has had agents here since the beginning, stopping those who trespass on our knowledge, our greatest achievement, the library hidden beneath these sands. The total of all the knowledge of my people."

"So...there is no Maljarna?"

"Maljarna is one of my forms. I have been here so long and have learned so much of your kind's ways, I can pass undetected when I wish. I have been many men, many women, in many times. Since these people came to this land, I and others of my kind have weaved our way throughout their history. Waiting and watching."

"Waiting for what?"

"For a time when the library could no longer reside here safely."

"So there is no Nulla?" Camp whispered.

"There is always a Nulla. My kind is careful not to interfere in your species' affairs more than is necessary. We have been, for some time, a Nulla to your kind, as a punishment will be a Nulla for a young child. A terrible danger which threatens when rules, albeit vague ones, are broken. All races, even ours, have their Nulla. We have woven beliefs and what you call magic to prevent your kind from discovering our caches of knowledge. Other species, above us, have done the same in a careful pattern which imitates the architecture of the universe." Maljarna smiled, but now Camp could almost see the thing inside of Maljarna, the thing which moved his body like a puppet. A wisdom so ancient that it dwarfed human civilizations stared out at him from behind mild, wide-set eyes.

"Why did you kidnap the Americans? Peaslee? Steuben?"

"We needed information about what your group was up to. From their interrogations in the ancient past, we created a document which we placed in our library, millions of years before your men were kidnapped. It was to lead a traitor of our kind on a more direct, and therefore more predictable, path. We did not harm anyone. We have set everything back as it was. It is our way."

"A traitor?"

"The one thing we cannot fully account for in time is the action of another of our kind. This makes a traitor very dangerous. The earlier the plan of the traitor is thwarted, the more likely the traitor is to compose another, more effective plan, or else that plan's prevention will cause some other destructive outcome which then must be corrected. Correcting time is a very precise process. We allowed the traitor to compose a plan and find the necessary elements, elements we chose to leave in plain sight. Bait for our trap. For this reason only did we interfere by interrogating your agents in the past. This is why the library is here and has not been moved. The ability is well within our means. It is a large trap for those of our kind who stray. It is well known among my kind that it holds many secrets."

"This interrogation—" Camp sputtered.

"Led the traitor on a very precise course. Even now it follows it. We are waiting at its journey's end."

"What about the others? The man at the building?"

"The man who posed as Steuben worked for the British government. They have learned of the library and have chosen to kill to keep such a secret, even from their allies. We dealt with them using our methods. The library must not fall into human hands. It would ruin...history."

"What's in the library?"

"Everything. Before and after this time. Everything, encompassed in books which will last forever, untouched and pure for our kind to recover in the future."

"Everything," Joe whispered, his face full of reverence.

"It must be removed from human reach. The books are a dangerous tool. Too dangerous for a species so obsessed with time and location as humanity. It will take some time before your species grows beyond its unsound temporal provincialism. Then, perhaps, contact will be made between our two species."

"I...I think I understand," Camp mumbled.

"This will all be removed by my kind, and you must return and report that it is so. That nothing remains here. Otherwise others will come, and they may uncover something we overlook.

"I have grown...fond of you, Joe Camp. You represent to me what is good about being human. There is a feeling I cannot name which fills me when I perform an act of selflessness on behalf of another human. Where I risk my existence for another, less fortunate being. You do this without thinking. Perhaps someday we shall meet again. Until then, this all must remain secret. You must tell your leaders only that this place is gone, now, that nothing remains here but dust."

“I will try.”

“You will not need to try. Watch.” With a click, the machine to Maljarna’s right sputtered to terrible life.

CHAPTER 30:
I've watched and waited for your light

May 29, 1943: Leopoldville, Belgian Congo

Major David Leslie Cornwall walked the rows of the small hospital, housed in an old Belgian church built fifty years ago, during the last great wave of colonialism of the last century. It smelled of gangrene and vomit and some undeniable, underlying odor which was like antiseptic death, a smell which preceded the last frantic minutes of some improbable surgery that would kill despite all good intentions. He had traveled far to get here, not only in distance but in experience. Loaded down with writs, files, and maps, his journey was filled with teletype messages from London command at every stop: numbers of the dead, the wounded, and the missing in stark black and white, numbers which grew by the hour along with his own crushing guilt. If only they had found the location of the alien books in Australia. If only Barnsby had his vision sooner. How many men would never come home to England now because of his failure? How many more would die because of his damnable ineptitude?

Cornwall looked bad. Disheveled. His hair was combed straight back and thick with pomade, not styled in his usual manner. His uniform was clean and pressed, but was stained in the armpits and down the back with sweat. His face was blotchy and covered in bug bites. His demeanor was not much better.

Everything had been spinning out of control since his agents had missed intercepting the DELTA GREEN team in Australia. More bad news from Australia had arrived with the latest teletype. Two of his PISCES agents had come out of the desert at the beginning of the month with stories of some type of explosion. A search had been conducted by Menzies' men, so far to no avail. No stones in the middle of the flatlands, no ruins, and no books. Someone or something had removed them before he could secure them, just after he discovered the connection between Peaslee, Jermyn and the stones. The PISCES men he'd sent to intercept the DELTA GREEN team were still missing, presumed dead. Was it the Americans? He didn't know. Perhaps General Donovan was far more clever than he had believed.

Flanked by two British soldiers, Cornwall walked past the doctors and nurses without a second glance, purposefully marching up the aisle with an authoritarian stride. The two soldiers followed in near lock-step, their faces as blank as masks, toting rifles. Both were tan and jungle-thin, dressed in British khaki jungle fatigues.

The little Gurkha whom Cornwall had travelled so far to see was nothing more than a bundle of bones beneath a thin mosquito net and a pile of clean white sheets. Rai's hands, misshapen and stump-like, were wrapped in thick bandages rich with what Cornwall believed at first to be blood, but which as he approached he realized was actually antiseptic treatment. The smell around him

was fragrant with feces, alcohol, and the thick stench of morphine. The Nepalese man's cheeks were sunken and his eyes were bruised pits, closed to the world. He looked tiny, like a smashed mockery of a child, like a cadaver pulled from the ground after months of cold rot. Like the major's, his face was covered in bug bites and scabs. His breath came in deep pulses, lifting his ruined hands, resting atop his chest, slowly up and down. Unconscious pain crawled across his sleeping face with each breath. A morphine drip was installed nearby, allowing the soldier to sleep even with his destroyed limbs, despite whatever pain made it through the haze.

Somehow, in this state, the shattered man had stumbled from the most treacherous jungle on Earth after traveling through it for more than two weeks. He was discovered by a native work crew constructing a railroad spur through the jungle near Itoko, sprawled across the tracks like a corpse. A few of the men had even watched in silence as the little Nepalese man had stumbled from the bush and collapsed on the track, falling across it like it was a finish line in some insanely brutal race. None had ever seen a Gurkha before. Some believed he was Japanese, but cooler and more experienced heads prevailed.

"Wake up, Rai," Cornwall hissed. He impatiently snapped his fingers in the air, a sharp sound. A white man in the bed next to Rai stared impertinently at the major, mumbling curses under his breath in Walloon. Doctors looked on, unsure what to do. Nurses pouted. A nun shook her head at the major and left the room. The soldiers stirred uncomfortably behind him.

Rai's eyes lifted open slowly. His eyes were lucid, serene.

"Major," he croaked.

Cornwall tried to smile. He knelt close to the netting. "Rai, the mission...what happened?" Cornwall wasn't sweating just from the heat. The tension had him ready to bite his tongue off. If only Rai could tell him what he desperately needed to hear. The city in the Congo was their last chance to solve the mystery which had begun in Australia three years before with the mysterious books of Lawrence Hutchins. Perhaps the city in the jungle was an outpost like the one in Australia —perhaps it was another library. Perhaps there was still some chance to catch up. One last chance to know the future as fully as the past. The only other option was to cooperate with the Americans, something best left as a last resort. "Tell me what happened."

"The American made it. He did it. He did it, and I...helped him. There was a light and a sound. An explosion," Rai mumbled, his eyes closed, a thin smile on his lips.

"No!" Cornwall choked. His hands clenched in trembling fists. Before anyone could react the major had pulled away the mosquito netting and grabbed the injured man by the throat. He shook the rag-doll form twice in his muscular arms. The little Gurkha offered no resistance. His head shook wildly, spit flying from his numb mouth. A glass vial smashed on the ground as a doctor began to rush up the aisle to stop the major, discarding a tray full of medicines without a second thought. The man in the bed next to the major reached out to grab at him, but his sickly, thin hands fell away from the British man's powerful frame.

"YOU BLOODY WOG! DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE! DO YOU KNOW WHAT

YOU'VE BLOODY WELL DONE?" Cornwall shrieked. His eyes bulged and spit flew from his lips. He wanted to rend the little man to pieces, to rip him up as easily as he would tear up a pound note.

The two soldiers pulled the major off the little Gurkha with difficulty, struggling with their rifles slung over their shoulders. The three danced an uneasy, halting minuet with arms stiffly locked around one another, knocking over an end table and a chair. The morphine drip smashed on the ground in a huge puddle of glass and liquid. Finally, red-faced and wheezing, the major stopped struggling and the men released him. As the major composed himself he could hear hissing, shouts in French, and the little Gurkha laughing. A doctor stood behind the men, shouting at them in French.

"Oh shut up already, you bloody frogs," Cornwall hissed.

Blood oozed from beneath Rai's bandages in a sluggish stream, but the smile on his face was free from all pain. All the humor left the little man's face as he looked through Cornwall sadly. Cornwall found his stare drawn into the black eyes of Rai. Perfect, clean circles of black.

"I know what I did, major," Rai said quietly. "I know precisely what I did. Do you?"

CHAPTER 31:
The clock hands fall, and time comes to an end for me

July 29, 1943: Swanscombe, U.K.

The group was gathered near the Swanscombe Abbey, a frail structure which stuck out of the blunt green landscape like a finger pointing to heaven. It overlooked the grey sea, rich with gulls and the cool breeze blowing off occupied France, nothing more than a thin strip of tan on the horizon to the east. Across the channel Fortress Europe stood unchallenged, and would remain so for some time. For the time being, Fortress Europe sent tokens the abbey's way every once in a while, a meal for the worms. Pilots, soldiers and naval men were laid to rest in view of the land they had died trying to set free.

The graveyard had been there for centuries, as had the abbey, each feeding the other in the loop of religious ritual. The group of people had gathered there to lay a memory to rest, another son who had perished in the war, First Lieutenant Thomas Arnold. Forever lost in the jungles of the Congo, forever on his last mission, gone to whatever fate time had dictated for him. A stone was set, a hole had been dug, an empty coffin prepared. A man would be commemorated. Most in the crowd hoped to push whatever feelings they had on the matter into that coffin, to ball them up and bury them. Few seemed capable of letting go. In their own ways, each one suffered.

General William Donovan stood by the graveside, a pug man in dress khakis, face still and calm, his cap at his side. His intensity seemed to push people away from him. He stood at the very lip of the grave, as if at any moment he would himself plunge into it. When the pastor began speaking Donovan started and stared at the man incredulously, as if the priest had disrupted some sacred moment with his speech.

Commander Martin Cook stood next to Donovan, looking earnestly at the pastor. He felt as if he were straining his face to project the illusion that there was something left in the pomp and circumstance to believe in. He desperately hoped his skepticism did not show.

Next to Cook stood Lieutenant Joseph Camp, still sunburned, still stick-thin and sickly, his barrel chest looking odd next to his rail-thin arms. His uniform was, however, pressed smooth and perfect for the first time in months. Camp's eyes were clouded over in thought. He had not known the man whose memory they were honoring, and he was on his way back to Burma that same night after being debriefed for DELTA GREEN clearance at Joint Intelligence Command. Images repeated over and over in his mind, vague recollections of the incidents in Australia intermixed with the horrors of the report he had read the previous night. The word 'Nulla' played across his tongue silently several times during the service, but he couldn't for the life of him remember just where he had heard the phrase before.

Major Michael Stillman stood like a statue next to Joe Camp. He wore Army dress like the rest, but it was obvious he had lost a lot of weight and had not worn his uniform for a long time. He looked like a boy playing dress-up in his father's clothing. A jagged line of angry red stitches traced its way up the left side of his face like a fracture in a vase. His green eyes peered from uneven sockets with a stare that saw for miles. When the pastor stopped speaking, Stillman dropped a nickel photograph of himself and Arnold, sunburned and happy, two years younger, into the grave after the casket. He didn't wait around afterwards and left without acknowledging anyone else in the crowd. No one turned to see him go.

Captain Mark Steuben stared straight ahead as if concentrating on some distant point, like he was willing himself away from the path to the grave which lay before him. Like Camp, he could not recall what exactly had occurred in Australia, but unlike Camp he didn't care. Those nearest to him could smell the alcohol coming off him in waves like the summer heat.

Mr. and Mrs. Alan Barnsby huddled together for comfort next to the pastor, as if it were freezing cold instead of a perfect summer day. Dressed in his usual black, Barnsby openly wept during most of the funeral and was finally led away by his young and pretty wife, who was several months pregnant. Donovan looked on the Brit with eyes as cold as flint and frowned as the couple walked away. ***Damned, double crossing—***

At the foot of the grave stood Marjorie Arnold, Thomas Arnold's mother, dabbing her eyes with a black, silk handkerchief and occasionally glancing up at the sky. She had traveled halfway around the world to bury an empty coffin at the behest of Billy Donovan, a last favor to a man to whom she had sacrificed her children. Now that she was here, she found it hard to even consider the fact that Tommy was really dead. She expected at some future date to somehow see Tommy and his younger brother Lucas again, as if they were away on a long errand and not dead in some pointless war. She looked old but not infirm. Her hair had faded to steel grey and her face was wrinkled, but something in her presence strengthened the rest of the mourners.

Overhead, drawing their attention away from the hole at their feet, a low, penetrating drone filled the air. In the perfect blue sky, tiny black planes crept forward across the vastness of heaven in V-shaped formations, heading implacably across the channel and into the heart of the Reich.

Marjorie tightened her black-gloved hand that of the little boy beside her and, sniffling, tried to smile. She looked down at the little miracle who had walked into her life less than three months before. She would never let him go off to war. She would never let him leave her. It was like a second chance. It was like a reprieve from God himself.

"Look Billy. Planes," she said.

But the somber little boy, dressed all in black, continued to look at the hole. His black hair surrounded his pale, thin face like a frame. It was a face which was already showing the first signs of puberty, and his liquid eyes played across the surface of the casket. They fixed on the photograph of himself, in a different life, in a different body, and for a moment he felt a pang of sadness. Or perhaps madness?

No one should have to attend his own funeral, Thomas Arnold thought to himself, and he turned his young eyes to the sky.

EPILOGUE:
To Hinder a Gentleman from Hell, Part 2

December 25, 1961: Blackpool, U.K.

The clock hands fixed on midnight and the bell began to strike. From below him, through the floor, Lieutenant General David Leslie Cornwall could hear his family begin their revelry anew, shouting and laughing and singing as it officially became Christmas Day.

Cornwall's mind was fixed in the past, on the strange books of Lawrence Hutchins that they had recovered so many years ago in Australia. The books which told the future. Thousands of facts had been gleaned from their strange, cellulose pages, facts about the future stretching into the unknown decades which still lay ahead of him. It was this most of all which nearly kept him from the task at hand—the want of seeing some of the miraculous things they predicted. But his sense of duty persisted. The facts were sporadic, random, and almost always general.

Almost.

One of the assortment of alien books contained the bland recollection of some dreary man who had served in the Ministry of Defense during the early 1960s. The cheerless functionary was questioned by some sort of interrogator who had more than a passing interest in the particulars about British intelligence personnel. In those strange metal pages the clerk recalled hearing some gossip, which commonly circulates around such bureaucracies, about the retired Lieutenant General Cornwall. Many believed he had died quietly in his family home on Christmas 1961, but almost all at the Ministry knew he had actually committed suicide and the incident had been covered up by the government.

For two decades there had raged a debate within the ranks of British intelligence as to whether these books Cornwall had put so much faith in, these books he had betrayed their wartime allies for, were worth anything at all. One of the arguments against the books' validity, one that had been thrown in Cornwall's face again and again, was Cornwall's predicted suicide. "Do you really believe you would ever kill yourself?" he was asked, over and over again.

When he had first read those words, the notion of taking his own life had seemed almost nonsensical. Nevertheless, over and over again, other events in the books came to pass, reinforcing the certainty of his impending doom. At times Cornwall had tried to imagine why he might kill himself nearly two decades in the future. A painful and terminal illness seemed the most likely reason, but as the years counted down no organs failed, no tumors devoured his body, no ailment of the blood eclipsed his future.

It wasn't until the last few years that he could feel the necessary emotions gathering, one by one,

like volatile chemicals being mixed to form an explosive. They had been there, stirring, for some time. All of his control, after all, all of his power was nothing but an illusion.

As his escapes narrowed and his future darkened, he began to see that he had one last duty to perform.

If Cornwall's betrayals were to have any value, then the promise of the library had to be more than some foolish pipe dream. The books, and all their prosaic talk of the future, would have to be true. Everything in them would have to be true. Otherwise, all of it would have been senseless, futile, hollow. Cornwall may have failed to deliver the library, but he'd be damned in hell before he would allow his quest, his Holy Grail, to be nothing more than folly.

This moment had been preordained by the very power he had hoped to harness, but which he now knew he could never hope to understand. Cornwall knew he would never understand anything...

...anything except his last duty. He would protect the future by doing his part to make it the past.

Cornwall looked down the barrel of his Webley and tried desperately to see any future at all, but the black eye only looked back at him blankly.

Then, as the clock tolled twelve, just when he had given up hope, a light.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

First and foremost, I must tip my hat to the master, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, one more time, and the two marvelous tales of his I used as a basis to construct this novel, "Arthur Jermyn" and "The Shadow Out of Time." Both tales haunted me as a teenager and continue to hold that certain fear of the unknowable today, in an age of million-dollar special effects and endless dull horror movies. Their detail and richness outshines anything I have seen, and they inspired me in different ways to answer some questions that they raised in me. If you have not read them prior to this novel, read them now.

As for the questions that bothered me within those stories, the few ideas which were not clearly addressed were, for the most part, behind-the-scenes questions which could not have been presented in the stories themselves without significantly altering their narratives. Still, the gaps were very intriguing.

Why had the Great Race left their library in the desert of Australia to be found if it could be so disruptive to human history? Why did they not move it before Peaslee and company discovered it, if indeed they have traveled all of history? And most importantly, what became of the powerful "flying polyps" once they broke free of the Great Races' wards? Wouldn't the unstoppable beasts once more return to supremacy of the globe, erecting their black towers? Even more puzzling, if the Great Race's weapons were no match for the extra-dimensional polyps, how did they force them beneath the ground in the first place? These questions haunted my mind. In this novel I attempt to answer them, as well as other questions I had considered in H.P.L.'s wonderful tale "Arthur Jermyn."

Why had the ape race degenerated after constructing such a megalithic city—or did they? Why were there not other cities of the apes elsewhere on the continent? Or had the apes led to mankind as the story implies, with some inherent similarity in genetics between the white apes and humans?

It is hoped the reader understands I am not attempting to alter or change the stories in question, but to add a new layer of depth upon the almost limitless layers H.P.L. himself wrought decades ago.

Thank you for reading this book.

And, once more, thanks for everything, H.P.L.

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Thank you to John H. Crowe III for answering my boring and often endless questions about World War Two minutiae. "When did the Sten Mark II come into common use?" "Would a pistol explode if electricity of a high enough voltage was run through it?" "Field dress or battle dress for Waffen-SS in Belgium in 1942?" The man is a walking encyclopedia. Additional gratitude to Brian Appleton, who no doubt had to pore through this manuscript three times with a red marker until his eyes began to bleed. Sorry it wasn't any shorter, Brian. I tried. I tried.

And a special thanks to all those who have made Delta Green such a success through their ongoing devotion to the idea!